

**RESPONSE TO HCR 173
OF THE 2014 REGULAR SESSION
OF THE LOUISIANA LEGISLATURE**

**Submitted By:
THE LOUISIANA BOARD OF REGENTS
&
THE LOUISIANA STATE BOARD OF ELEMENTARY &
SECONDARY EDUCATION**

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Introduction

House Concurrent Resolution 173 (HCR 173) urges and requests the Louisiana Board of Regents (BoR) and the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to “study certain issues relative to the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), and to submit a written report of findings and conclusions, including any recommendations for related legislation, to the House Committee on Education and the Senate Committee on Education not later than sixty days prior to the beginning of the 2015 Regular Session of the Legislature of Louisiana” (Appendix A).

HCR 173 specifically requests that the following issues be studied and addressed in the response:

- (1) Measures that can be taken in order to align the granting of TOPS awards with the meeting of Louisiana’s workforce needs.
- (2) Facilitating the efforts of guidance counselors with respect to counseling students about TOPS before they enter high school and while they are in high school.
- (3) Establishing a “Total Louisiana” workforce counseling program in which each high school student receives personalized guidance counseling on how his skills and aptitudes, as indicated by standardized tests and any other evaluation tool, best align with Louisiana employment opportunities, as indicated by the Louisiana Workforce Commission’s evaluation of areas of economic growth, and a career plan is developed for the student such that the TOPS scholarship can be invested in an education path that meets the needs of Louisiana’s economy and leads to lifelong employment and residency in Louisiana.
- (4) The cost of TOPS thus far and projected future costs, degrees obtained by TOPS recipients, the number of TOPS recipients who lose their awards, and the number of TOPS recipients who do not graduate.
- (5) Relative to TOPS-Tech, the feasibility of lowering the minimum ACT score required for initial eligibility and eliminating chemistry courses from the core curriculum required for initial eligibility.
- (6) Relative to TOPS-Tech, the feasibility of allowing certain individuals who have received a general equivalency diploma to qualify for the award.

In September 2014, Board of Regents’ staff sought study group appointments and held an initial meeting of the group. Subsequent meetings were held in October and November. The final report of the Study Group was considered by the BESE and the BoR at their annual joint meeting on December 11, 2014.

This response provides an overview of each of the six issues identified in HCR 173 and explores possible solutions.

A Brief Overview of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)

There are currently five levels of TOPS awards available to students enrolling at Louisiana's colleges and universities: TOPS Tech Early Start, TOPS Tech, Opportunity, Performance, and Honors. The criteria for eligibility for the TOPS Tech, Opportunity, Performance and Honors awards include completion of a defined high school core curriculum, with a minimum grade point average in core courses, and a minimum ACT composite score (the TOPS Tech award allows a silver level score on the ACT WorkKeys system to substitute for the ACT composite score). Table 1 lists current criteria and awards for the Opportunity, Performance and Honors awards. Table 2 lists current criteria and awards for the TOPS Tech award.

Table 1: TOPS Eligibility Criteria, by Award Level, 2014

Award	Core	Core GPA	ACT Composite	Award Specifics ¹	Duration
<i>Opportunity</i>	19 Units	2.50	20	Full-Time Tuition	4 years, or 8 semesters
<i>Performance</i>	19 Units	3.00	23	Full-Time Tuition + \$400/year	4 years, or 8 semesters
<i>Honors</i>	19 Units	3.00	27	Full-Time Tuition + \$800/year	4 years, or 8 semesters

¹For students attending regionally accredited independent colleges or universities that are members of LAICU, TOPS provides the amount equal to the weighted average of public school tuition paid the previous academic year.

Table 2: TOPS Tech Eligibility Criteria, by Award Level, 2014

	TOPS Tech Option 1	TOPS Tech Option 2
Core	17 Units	19 Units
Core GPA	2.50	2.50
ACT Composite or ACT WorkKeys	17 or Silver Level	17 or Silver Level
Max Award at Public Schools that do not offer a baccalaureate degree	Tuition	Tuition
Max Award at Public Schools that offer baccalaureate degrees and at LAICU institutions and certain cosmetology and proprietary schools	The average TOPS Tech payments paid to students attending public schools that do not offer a baccalaureate degree	The average TOPS Tech payments paid to students attending public schools that do not offer a baccalaureate degree
Duration	2 years	2 years

The TOPS Tech Early Start award provides up to \$600 per academic year for any eligible 11th or 12th grade student attending a Louisiana public high school who wishes to concurrently enroll for up to six credit hours per semester at any eligible institution in a vocational course of study leading to an industry-based certification in a top demand occupation. Standard eligibility for a TOPS Tech Early Start award includes:

- Being in “good standing” as an 11th or 12th grade student in a Louisiana public high school
- Achievement of a cumulative GPA of 2.00 on a 4.00 scale, on all courses attempted
- Scoring at least a 15 on the English and mathematics subsection of ACT Plan assessment
- Having an approved 5-year Education and Career Plan.

To maintain a TOPS Tech Early Start award, students must:

- Remain in “good standing” as an 11th or 12th grade student
- Maintain a 2.00 on a 4.00 scale on all high school courses attempted
- Remain in “Good Standing” as determined and verified by the public college attended
- Achieve a college cumulative GPA of 2.50 on a 4.00 scale by the end of the spring term; maintain steady academic progress at the end of all other terms (2.00 cumulative GPA).

Issue 1: The Alignment of TOPS with Louisiana’s Workforce Needs

Although the HCR 173 Study Group recognized that workforce development is not solely tied to vocational, career and technical education, the group determined that the greatest need for alignment of TOPS with Louisiana’s workforce needs was within the TOPS Tech Early Start and TOPS Tech programs. The Study Group determined that the TOPS Opportunity, Performance and Honors awards programs are currently aligned with workforce needs and thus made no recommendations for altering them.

TOPS Tech Early Start and TOPS Tech were developed to aid those students who wish to obtain occupational training via a sub-baccalaureate degree program. A more strategic alignment between these two programs and Louisiana’s short-term and long-term workforce needs has been identified as a key policy issue in recent years.

Changes to the Administration of TOPS Tech Early Start and TOPS Tech via Act 737 of the 2014 Regular Legislative Session: Infusing Workforce Needs

During the 2014 Regular Legislative Session, changes to R.S. 17: 3048.5 via Act 737 increased the alignment of workforce needs with the administration of TOPS Tech Early Start and TOPS Tech. Tables 3 and 4 below summarize these changes.

Table 3: Changes to TOPS Tech Early Start via Act 737 of the 2014 Legislative Session

Area Changed	Prior	Now
Authority for defining/approving eligible credentials	Board of Regents	Workforce Investment Council
What is funded	Pursuit of an eligible credential	Technical or applied course leading to an approved credential
Eligible credentials must be:	Industry-based occupational or vocational credential that: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Is identified in the Occupation Forecasting Conference as a credential for an occupation in top demand in LA. (2) Is recognized by the State Industry-Based Certification Council (3) Is approved by BESE and the Board of Supervisors of Community and Technical Colleges 	Industry-Based Certification, a Certificate of Applied Science, or a Certificate of Technical Sciences that meets the following requirements: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Is identified by the Occupation Forecasting Conference as a credential for an occupation in top demand in LA. (2) Is recognized by the State Industry-Based Certification Leadership Council
Eligible postsecondary institutions:	Louisiana public	Louisiana public/non-public postsecondary institutions; up to 5 training providers the first year that are recognized by the Workforce Commission and approved by BESE.

Table 4: Changes to TOPS Tech via Act 737 of the 2014 Legislative Session

Area Changed	Prior	Now
Authority for defining/approving eligible credentials	Board of Regents	LOSFA
What is funded	Skill or occupational training	Skill or occupational training
Eligible credentials must be:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any and all Certificate, Diploma, Associate of Applied Technology, and Associate of Applied Science programs - Any coordinated and comprehensive course of study which qualifies a student upon completion to sit for testing leading to and/or meeting national and/or state professional/occupational licensure and/or certification requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any and all Certificate, Diploma, Associate of Applied Technology, and Associate of Applied Science programs - Any coordinated and comprehensive course of study which qualifies a student upon completion to sit for testing leading to and/or meeting national and/or state professional/occupational licensure and/or certification requirements - Any training leading to an Industry-Based Certification, a Certificate of Applied Science or a Certificate of Technical Sciences approved by the Workforce Investment Council
Eligible postsecondary institutions:	Louisiana public	Louisiana public and non-public postsecondary institutions; up to 5 training providers recognized by the Workforce Commission and approved by BESE.

Current TOPS Tech Early Start Eligibility Requirements

The question of eligibility for TOPS Tech Early Start continues to be raised. Currently, the TOPS Tech Early Start program requires an ACT PLAN assessment score of at least a 15 on the English and math sub-sections (R.S. 17: 3048). The challenge that this minimum eligibility requirement poses is that it may unintentionally disenfranchise students who do not have an ACT PLAN score. However, these students may possess an ACT score, an SAT score, a WorkKeys assessment level, or the equivalent of any of the above, which could satisfy the assessment eligibility criteria if not for the prescriptive language in R.S. 17:3048.

Observations and Recommendations

The legislation recognizes that Louisiana needs a state-of-the-art system of career and technical education provided by high schools, community colleges, and employers in order to provide the skilled workforce demanded by Louisiana businesses. A pre-existing challenge that has plagued career and technical education in Louisiana is that there are, and have been fundamental misconceptions and myths that have stigmatized the path that leads to good paying jobs. As a result, just one percent of high school graduates in Louisiana earn a Career Diploma.

BESE's new Jump Start program and policy, which involved higher education, economic and workforce development, business and industry, local education agencies (LEA's) and other educational stakeholders in its development encourages school districts, colleges, and businesses in each region of the State to collaborate in providing career courses and workplace experiences to high school students, while seeking to end the long-standing stigma against career education. In support of this effort, the 2014-2015 Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) Task Force and BESE proposed and the Legislature approved two issues regarding career education:

- 1) Double the career education funding weight for courses in high wage, high growth fields.
- 2) Provide a subsidy for districts enrolling high school students in approved career courses and college credit courses outside of their high school course work.

The BoR, the Department of Education and BESE support the greater use of TOPS Tech Early Start funds for students seeking Jump Start credentials in community and technical college settings, or in other settings outside of the traditional high school which lead to valuable educational experiences, workplace skills, and the TOPS Tech award.

During the 2014 Regular Session of the Legislature, the Senate adopted Senate Resolution 153 (SR 153) which urged and requested the Department of Education and the Board of Regents to jointly study how to appropriately align the Career Diploma requirements and qualifying for a TOPS Tech award. To address SR 153 specifically, the Board of Regents and the Department of Education met to determine if there were any internal policies, rules or practices which may stifle progress. Finding none, the two agencies jointly hosted meetings of a SR 153 Study Group to review and evaluate how to appropriately align the new Jump Start Career Diploma Pathway (Career Diploma) requirements and qualifying for a TOPS Tech award. The Study Group consisted of representatives from the Board of Regents (BOR), Department of Education (DOE), the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS), Louisiana Economic Development (LED), Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA), the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC), and the Workforce Investment Council (WIC).

Philosophically, the SR 153 Study Group agreed that the Jump Start Career Diploma course work and TOPS Tech should be aligned in order to provide students with an additional option

and pathway to postsecondary education and the job market. The first task was to evaluate the current TOPS Tech Core and compare it with the new Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum. The second was to review the other qualifying requirements to obtain the award.

After reviewing the curricula, the SR 153 Study Group agreed that the current curricular misalignment is in three areas: In Science there are 3 TOPS Tech (TT) units required vs. 2 Jump Start (JS) units; in Math there are 4 JS units required vs. 3 TT units; and in Social Studies there are also 3 TT units required vs. 2 JS units. Additionally, the Study Group recognized that the Social Studies credits should be aligned with the University Diploma Pathway so flexible transferability among diploma pathways can be achieved. Therefore, it included in its recommendation the following change for Social Studies:

Social Studies: 2 units

- *One credit from the following: U.S. History, AP U.S. History, or IB U.S. History*
- *One credit from the following: Government, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: Comparative, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: United States, or Civics*

The SR 153 Study Group also observed that beyond the curriculum, there are other qualifying elements that are required in order for a TOPS Tech scholarship to be awarded. Specifically, in addition to successful completion of the TOPS Tech Core, the student must maintain a 2.5 GPA computed on core courses only; and make a 17 or higher ACT composite score (SAT equivalent) or achieve a Silver Certificate Level on the WorkKeys Core Assessments. However, realizing that the HCR 173 Study Group was addressing these items in their work, the SR 153 Study Group remained silent on these additional topics.

The SR 153 Study Group, Board of Regents, the Department of Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education have reviewed the current curricular and other qualifying elements to determine how to best merge, blend and/or align the Jump Start and the TOPS Tech programs. It appears that the most expedient alignment strategy is to delete the current TOPS Tech Core Curriculum and replace it with the new Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum that was approved through ACT No. 643 of the Regular Session of the 2014 Louisiana Legislature with the suggested modification for Social Studies.

Thus, the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education have received the Report from the SR 153 Study Group and offer the following recommendations to address Issue 1 in HCR 173:

1. Replace the current TOPS Tech Core Curriculum, including Options 1 and 2 as it is listed in the current statute (ACT No. 737) with the new Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum that was approved through ACT No. 643 during the Regular Session of the 2014 Louisiana Legislature.

2. Align the Social Studies credits for the Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum with the University Diploma Pathway so flexible transferability among diploma pathways can be achieved. Thus, social studies:

Social Studies: 2 units

- One credit from the following: U.S. History, AP U.S. History, or IB U.S. History
 - One credit from the following: Government, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: Comparative, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: United States, or Civics
3. Maintain the current TOPS Opportunity, Performance and Honors Awards criteria as viable paths to the TOPS Tech award.
 4. Urge the Department of Education, LEAs, Regional Jump Start Teams, higher education and other education and workforce partners as part of the information exchange to promote the new TOPS Tech Curriculum, to pay attention to strategic initiatives to attract large numbers of talented students to high wage, high demand fields including marketing protocols to attract diverse underrepresented groups.

In addition, the Board of Regents and BESE offer the following recommendation in an effort to address Issue 1 in HCR 173:

1. The current TOPS Tech Early Start assessment eligibility criteria, as prescribed in R.S. 17: 3048 should be expanded to include not only an ACT PLAN assessment score of at least a 15 on the English and math sub-sections, but also an equivalent ACT/SAT score, or a WorkKeys Bronze level score.

Issues 2 and 3: A “Total Louisiana” Workforce Counseling Program

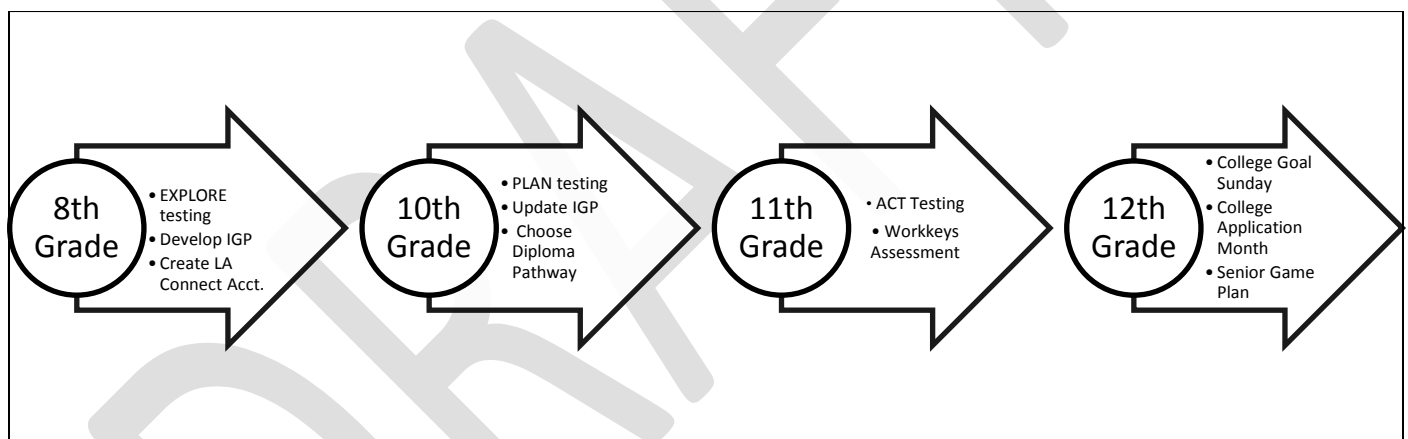
The Development and Implementation of an Individual Graduation Plan and Making Plans Beyond High School: Initiatives/Programs for all Students

Currently, all 8th grade students are required to develop, in consultation with their parents/legal guardians and a school guidance counselor, an Individual Graduation Plan (IGP). The students' EXPLORE test results can assist students/parents/counselors with the development of the IGP. The IGP provides the student with a guide to the next year's academic coursework. Through the LOSFA Portal, students are able to create a Louisiana Connect (LA Connect) account. LA Connect is an online, interactive tool that provides exploration supports for students/families/counselors; access to career interests, information on scholarship and grant opportunities; TOPS/TOPS Tech eligibility tracking; and the opportunity to create an IGP.

Students, parents and counselors also have access to the LOSFA Call Center for assistance with financial aid or college access questions.

At the end of the 10th grade, with the assistance of their parents/legal guardians and a school guidance counselor, students choose one of two diploma pathways (The TOPS University Pathway or the Jump Start Career Diploma Pathway), and update their IGP accordingly. Results from the PLAN test taken in 10th grade, can assist students/parents/counselors with updating the IGP. In the 11th grade, all students take the ACT and the WorkKeys Assessment in the districts where it is offered. It is important to note that the State Department of Education funds WorkKeys assessments for students enrolled in the Jump Start Career Diploma Pathway. In the 12th grade, students are able to participate in several initiatives which encourage them to and assist them with applying for college. This process, from 8th through the 12th grade, is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.



Professional Development for High School Counselors

An important component of any comprehensive counseling program is training Professional School Counselors. On-going professional development provides professional school counselors with the most up-to-date information on graduation, college and TOPS requirements. The following initiatives and tools are designed to assist professional school counselors:

- The Counselor Assistance Center (provided by the LA Dept. of Education)
- The Counselor Support Toolbox (provided by the LA Dept. of Education)
- The High School Student Planning Guide (provided by the LA Dept. of Education)
- State and Regional Jump Start Workshops (provided by the LA Department of Education)
- Super Summer Institute (provided by the LA Department of Education)

- Louisiana State Counselors' Conference (provided by the LA Counseling Association (LCA))
- STAR Jobs Rating System (resource provided by the Louisiana Workforce Commission & the State Workforce Investment Council)
- LaNEXT Magazine and the Acceler8 Special edition for 8th graders (resource provided collaboratively by multiple agency stakeholders)
- Statewide High School Counselor Training Workshops (provided by LOSFA)
- College and Career Counseling Initiative, an online curriculum on best practices (provided by the SREB and paid for by LOSFA)
- LOSFA Call Center (financial assistance and college access hotline)
- LOSFA Policy Bulletins (mechanism for informing secondary/postsecondary contacts of policy/funding updates)
- LOSFA LOOP Publication (monthly publication informing secondary/postsecondary contacts of current events/initiatives associated with colleges access and success)

Observations and Recommendations

Many initiatives exist to inform students and guide them down their high school academic path as they prepare for college or a career. However, a fundamental question to be answered is whether students are receiving the comprehensive services (i.e., personal, social, academic, and career development) necessary to guide them through high school and into college or a career.

To complement the work of the professional school counselors, a number of agencies and third party entities in partnership with LEAs coordinate efforts and services to inform students about their postsecondary education and career trajectory. Currently, a WIC Subcommittee on High Schools has developed a College and Career Planning Services (i.e. counseling, coaching, graduation support) Survey to determine how widespread and effective the current range of counseling and coaching services are throughout the state; who is delivering those services; and how much is being invested in these services.

In addition to the work of the school counselors, among its many forms of outreach, LOSFA staff also offer support in the form of intensive small group and one-on-one advising and follow-up. Due to the loss of key funding sources, LOSFA will be challenged to continue to provide these services in the same capacity.

It is vital that the resources used to support these efforts not only be maintained, but expanded to promote college and career readiness for Louisiana students. Therefore, the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education make the following recommendations:

1. Request that the Legislature and others provide funding to maintain and expand effective supplemental counseling resources through all agencies, entities and school districts providing said services.

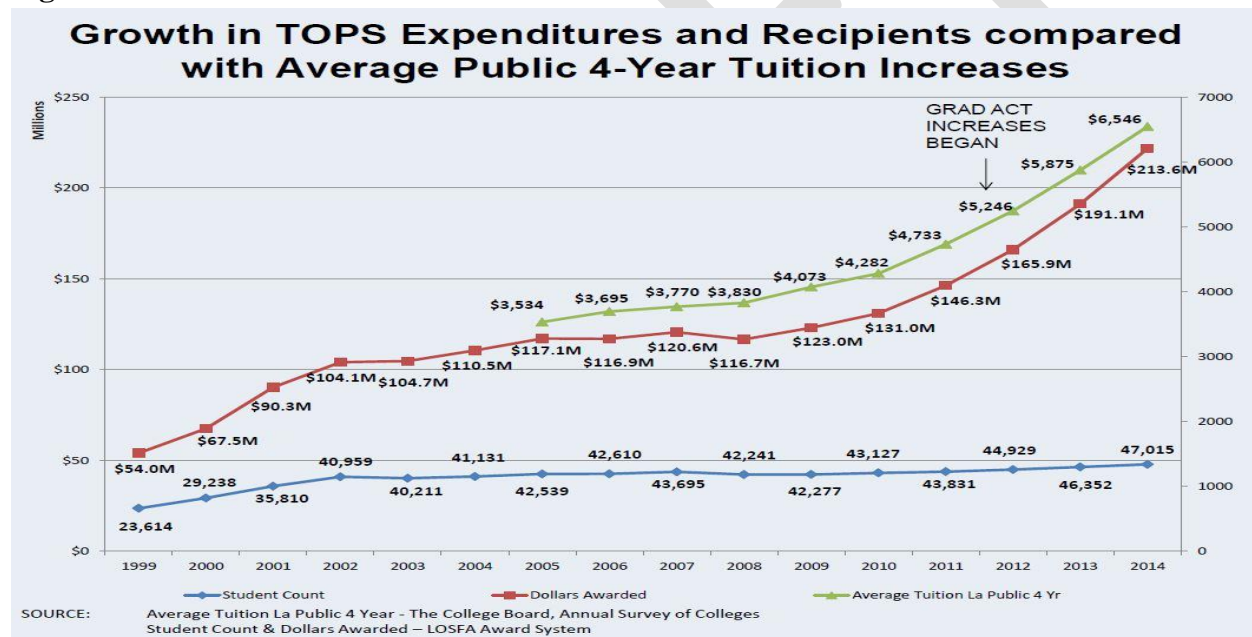
2. Avoid budget cuts or reductions that would negatively impact the implementation and/or expansion of counseling activities.
3. Urge the Department of Education and LEAs to prioritize counseling and partnerships to better inform students of postsecondary and career and technical education opportunities.

Issue 4: Program Costs, Degrees Obtained, and Graduation Rates

The Cost of TOPS Thus Far

From 1999 to 2014 the State spent approximately \$1.9 billion funding the TOPS program. During that same time period, total expenditures on the TOPS program increased 296%. In 1998-1999 the average TOPS award amount was \$2,286. In 2013-2014, the average amount was \$4,530, a 98% increase. These dramatic increases are due to increases in both enrollment and tuition, but primarily in tuition.

Figure 2.



Projected Future Costs

Calculating the future costs of TOPS requires forecasting college enrollment and making assumptions about future tuition rates. Figures 3 and 4 below attempt to project future costs through the 2018-19 academic year for TOPS Opportunity, Performance and Honors (OPH), TOPS Tech and TOPS Tech Early Start.

Figure 3.

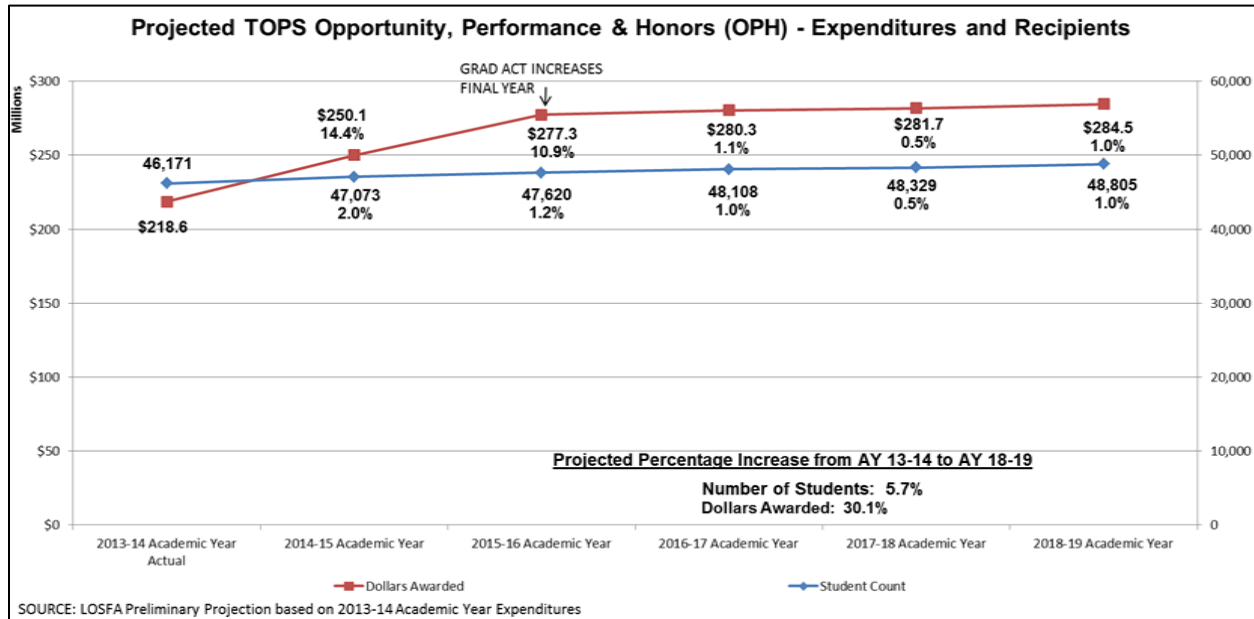
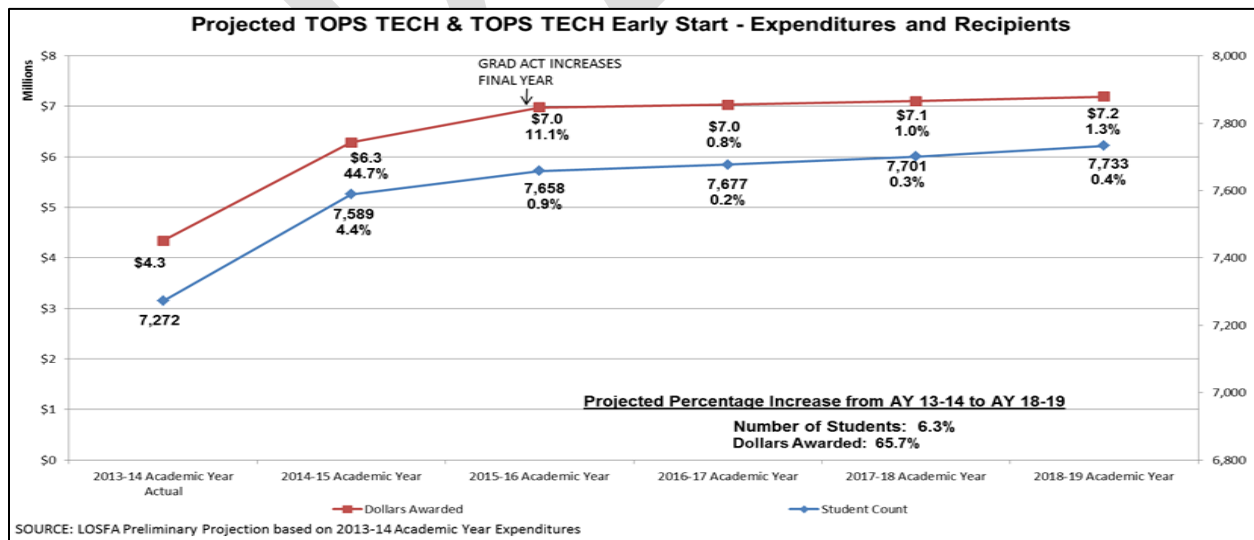


Figure 4.



Degrees Obtained by TOPS Recipients

Overall, the most popular majors for TOPS recipients (students who received TOPS at any time) are in a Business-related field (Business Administration, Management & Operations; Accounting

and Related Services; Marketing; Financial and Financial Management Services), followed by Humanities/related disciplines/General Studies, Education, and Nursing, as depicted in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Degrees Obtained by TOPS Recipients, 08-09 through 12-13

Degree	Number	Percentage
Teacher Education	4,407	9.0%
Liberal Arts & Sciences, General Studies & Humanities	4,296	8.8%
Registered Nursing, Nursing Administration, Nursing Research and Clinical Nursing	3,139	6.4%
Biology, General	3,011	6.2%
Business Administration, Management & Operations	2,790	5.7%
Psychology, General	2,052	4.2%
Accounting and Related Services	1,989	4.1%
Communication & Media Studies	1,834	3.8%
Marketing	1,192	2.4%
Finance and Financial Management Services	1,078	2.2%
English Language and Literature, General	1,037	2.1%
TOTAL	26,825	54.9%

Looking only at sub-bachelor's awards (associate, 1 year certificate, and diploma), the most popular majors for TOPS recipients (students who received TOPS at any time) are Humanities-related fields/General Studies, followed by Nursing, Instrumentation/Technician-related fields, and Business-related fields, as depicted in Table 6 below. The large number of two-year TOPS recipients majoring in General Studies could partly be explained by students' intention to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree.

Table 6: Sub-Bachelor's Degrees Obtained by TOPS Recipients, 08-09 through 12-13

Degree	Number	Percentage
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities	1,922	24.6%
Registered Nursing, Nursing Administration, Nursing Research and Clinical Nursing	503	6.4%
Practical Nursing, Vocational Nursing and Nursing Assistants	500	6.4%
Business Operations Support and Assistant Services	383	4.9%
Electromechanical Instrumentation and Maintenance Technologies/Technicians	368	4.7%
Industrial Production Technologies/Technicians	367	4.7%
TOTAL	4,043	51.7%

The Number of TOPS Recipients Who Lose Their TOPS Award

Approximately 11% of the 2012-13 entering freshmen class with TOPS awards had their awards cancelled during or immediately following their first year of college due to a failure to obtain 24 credit hours in an academic year. Between 2004 and 2013, 33% of TOPS awards were cancelled (with some of those cancelled due to GPA possibly being reinstated). The majority (63%) were

cancelled due to students' failure to earn 24 credits during an academic year. These data are depicted in Table 7 below.

Table 7: The Number of TOPS Recipients Who Lost Their Awards

Entering Cohort	Total # of Awards	Total # of Awards Cancelled*		Cancelled: 24 Hr. Requirement		Cancelled: GPA Requirement		Cancelled: Non-Continuous Enrollment		Cancelled: Student Resignation	
		Count	(%)	Count	(%)	Count	(%)	Count	(%)	Count	(%)
2004-05	14,620	6,050	(41%)	3,424	(23%)	354	(2%)	2,272	(16%)	729	(5%)
2005-06	14,443	6,111	(42%)	3,146	(22%)	357	(2%)	2,608	(18%)	699	(5%)
2006-07	14,667	6,090	(42%)	3,818	(26%)	358	(2%)	1,914	(13%)	727	(5%)
2007-08	14,227	5,779	(41%)	3,666	(26%)	497	(3%)	1,616	(11%)	656	(5%)
2008-09	14,920	5,949	(40%)	3,796	(25%)	586	(4%)	1,567	(11%)	603	(4%)
2009-10	15,297	5,640	(37%)	3,593	(23%)	582	(4%)	1,465	(10%)	567	(4%)
2010-11	15,576	4,708	(30%)	3,059	(20%)	441	(3%)	1,208	(8%)	635	(4%)
2011-12	16,042	3,397	(21%)	2,487	(16%)	155	(1%)	755	(5%)	545	(3%)
2012-13	16,824	1,930	(11%)	1,891	(11%)	8	(0%)	31	(0%)	459	(3%)
Total	136,616	45,654		28,880		3,338		13,436		5,620	

Beginning with the 2011-12 academic year, students were allowed to attend summer school at their own expense to meet the 24 hour requirement and/or to improve their GPA. Prior to this change, students only had the fall and spring semesters to accumulate the 24 credit hours needed and/or to improve their GPA in order to maintain their TOPS award. Utilization of the summer term to fulfill credit hour and GPA requirements should decrease the number of students losing their awards.

Graduation Rates of TOPS Recipients

Less than 30% of TOPS recipients (students who received TOPS at any time) graduate with a bachelor's degree within 100% of time (4 years). The majority (60%) graduate within 150% of time (6 years), with an additional 3% graduating within 200% of time (8 years). When measured over any timeframe, students without TOPS consistently graduate at lower rates. These data for the 2005 and 2006 entering college freshman cohorts are depicted in Table 8 below.

Table 8: TOPS vs. Non-TOPS Students: The Number Who Did/Did Not Graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree from a Public Institution

Cohort		100% of Time		150% of Time		200% of Time	
		Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate	Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate	Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate
2005	TOPS (10,869)	2,752 (25%)	8,117 (75%)	6,492 (60%)	4,377 (40%)	6,824 (63%)	4,045 (37%)
	Non-TOPS (8,946)	852 (10%)	8,094 (90%)	2,643 (30%)	6,303 (70%)	2,915 (33%)	6,031 (67%)
2006	TOPS (11,513)	3,052 (27%)	8,461 (73%)	6,866 (60%)	4,647 (40%)	N/A	N/A
	Non-TOPS (8,819)	824 (9%)	7,995 (91%)	2,626 (30%)	6,193 (70%)	N/A	N/A

Less than 5% of TOPS recipients (students who received TOPS at any time) graduate with an associate’s degree within 100% of time (2 years). Approximately 20% graduate within 200% of time (4 years). It should be noted, however, that these low rates among TOPS recipients are due in part to a “transfer phenomenon,” in which students begin their collegiate career at a two-year college and transfer to a four-year institution to seek a bachelor’s degree without obtaining an associate’s. Like the baccalaureate rate discussed above, students without TOPS consistently graduate with associate’s degrees at lower rates. These data for the 2006, 2007 and 2008 entering college freshman cohorts are depicted in Table 9 below.

Table 9: TOPS* vs. Non-TOPS Students: The Number Who Did/Did Not Graduate with an Associate Degree from a Public Institution**

Cohort		100% of Time		150% of Time		200% of Time	
		Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate	Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate	Did Graduate	Did Not Graduate
2006	TOPS (835)	34 (4%)	801 (96%)	123 (15%)	712 (85%)	176 (21%)	659 (79%)
	Non-TOPS (4,214)	50 (2%)	4,164 (98%)	171 (4%)	4,043 (96%)	298 (7%)	3,916 (93%)
2007	TOPS (799)	32 (4%)	767 (96%)	127 (16%)	672 (84%)	169 (21%)	630 (79%)
	Non-TOPS (4,907)	50 (1%)	4,857 (99%)	207 (4%)	4,700 (96%)	395 (8%)	4,512 (92%)
2008	TOPS (931)	30 (3%)	901 (97%)	133 (14%)	798 (86%)	185 (20%)	746 (80%)
	Non-TOPS (5,135)	47 (1%)	5,088 (99%)	237 (5%)	4,898 (95%)	409 (8%)	4,726 (92%)

*Includes TOPS and TOPS Tech

** Prior to submission to the Legislature, Board of Regents' staff will disaggregate the data in Table 9 into two tables illustrating the graduation rates for TOPS Tech recipients and TOPS Opportunity, Performance and Honors recipients.

Issues 5 and 6: Expanded Eligibility for TOPS Tech

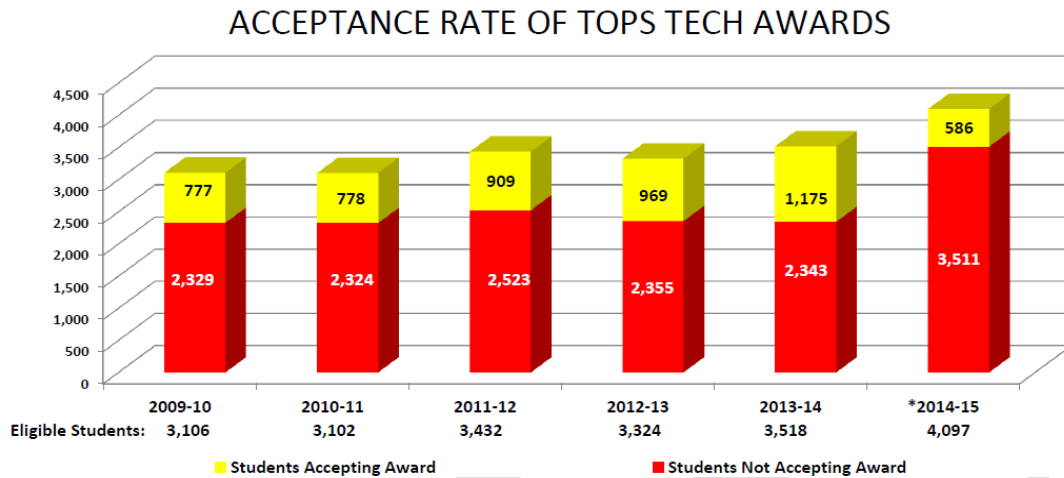
Re-evaluating the Eligibility Requirements for the TOPS Tech Award

To address workforce shortages, stagnant wages, and high unemployment, higher education stakeholders' discussions are geared toward increasing visibility of career and technical education fields. The need for certificates, diplomas and associate degree education is not expected to decline, as workforce projections by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce predict that 30 percent of jobs by 2020 will require less than a bachelor's degree, but more than a high school diploma. There are concerted efforts aimed at increasing accessibility to skilled training to ensure diverse pathways for Louisiana students to learn and cultivate unique talents. Such efforts include providing scholarships to qualified students enrolling in career and technical institutions.

Louisiana's TOPS Tech program takes a step in that direction by paying tuition for occupational training, primarily at Louisiana's two-year, cosmetology and proprietary schools. Despite these efforts, 85% of eligible TOPS Tech students (n= 3,511) in the 2014-15 cohort did not accept the award in the fall semester of 2015 (Figure 5). It is important to note that students who graduated

in 2014 have until the fall semester of 2015 to accept their awards. Therefore, the TOPS Tech acceptance rate will likely increase.

Figure 5.



In order to expand the number of students eligible for a TOPS Tech award, HCR 173 (charges five and six) requires that the two boards examine the feasibility of widening the eligibility parameters of the TOPS Tech award. Specifically, charge five is aimed at understanding the effects of (1) lowering the required minimum ACT composite score, and (2) eliminating chemistry courses as a required component of the core curriculum in the TOPS Tech program. Charge six calls for examining the feasibility of allowing certain individuals who take and receive a passing score on the high school equivalency test (HiSET) to qualify for the TOPS Tech award.

With respect to charge five, the current qualifying ACT composite score for students to receive a TOPS Tech award is 17 and a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.5. While lowering the ACT composite score might appear to increase accessibility for students at two-year colleges, data provided by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) indicate that lowering the ACT composite score to 15 (while maintaining the other eligibility requirements), would have yielded 816 additional students eligible to participate in a TOPS Tech award in 2014. It is also important to note that a WorkKeys Level of Silver is an option for students seeking the TOPS Tech Award.

With respect to the chemistry courses, effective with the 2014 high school graduating class Chemistry and Applied Chemistry are no longer required courses for the TOPS Tech core, although these courses can count towards the core requirements.

As to the general equivalency diploma question (charge six), findings indicate that expanding the TOPS Tech award to include individuals who received a passing score on the high school equivalency test (HiSET) would yield minimal increases in eligibility (n=148 students) in 2014.

Observations and Recommendations

Reviewing the findings with regard to charges five and six suggest that widening the criteria as a means to include more students in the TOPS Tech programs would have minimal effects on increasing students' participation. A more significant issue to address is how to increase participation in rigorous workforce preparation programs which yield an individual with the skills necessary to compete in the current and future workforce. Participation is a much larger issue than is eligibility. Moreover, how can the State meet its technical workforce needs through an award program by widening eligibility and participation without threatening the integrity of a 'merit-based' program, while preparing students for a workforce capable of meeting employer demands? Few would argue whether a high school dropout or a student with a lower ACT (or comparable test score) could be capable of receiving high-quality training for a high-demand job. The question is, "Is a TOPS merit scholarship the right avenue through which these individuals gain access to this training?"

The Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education recommend an alternative strategy to prepare and expand Louisiana's technical workforce. This strategy would lead to increased support of and participation in technical training, while maintaining the integrity of the TOPS award.

1. Design a state-supported Technical Workforce Grant that would support students who are seeking to pursue high-quality, post-secondary training. This would be a distinct industry based award that is based on a students' performance in a technical workforce area. Eligibility requirements could be designed to match industry demands with students' interests and capabilities.

If the Legislature determines not to implement the technical workforce award, the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education do not recommend lowering the required ACT score or allowing HiSET recipients to be eligible for the TOPS Tech award. Further lowering of required ACT scores is not commensurate with business and industry need.

2. Efforts should also be aimed at developing innovative strategies to promote the technical workforce award that address and dispel the fundamental misconceptions about career and technical education. These efforts should leverage all the individual statewide activities that are going on surrounding marketing and branding.

Summary of Recommendations

The Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education offer the following recommendations to address the issues identified in HCR 173:

- 1) Commiserate with the recommendations in Senate Resolution 153:
 - Replace the current TOPS Tech Core Curriculum, including Options 1 and 2 as it is listed in the current statute (ACT No. 737) with the new Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum that was approved through ACT No. 643 during the Regular Session of the 2014 Louisiana Legislature.
 - Align the Social Studies credits for the Jump Start Career Diploma Curriculum with the University Diploma Pathway so flexible transferability among diploma pathways can be achieved. Thus, social studies:
Social Studies: 2 units
 - One credit from the following: U.S. History, AP U.S. History, or IB U.S. History
 - One credit from the following: Government, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: Comparative, AP® U.S. Government and Politics: United States, or Civics
 - Maintain the current TOPS Opportunity, Performance and Honors Awards criteria as viable paths to the TOPS Tech award.
 - Urge the Department of Education, LEAs, Regional Jump Start Teams, higher education and other education and workforce partners as part of the information exchange to promote the new TOPS Tech Curriculum, to pay attention to strategic initiatives to attract large numbers of talented students to high wage, high demand fields including marketing protocols to attract diverse underrepresented groups.
- 2) The current TOPS Tech Early Start assessment eligibility criteria, as prescribed in R.S. 17: 3048 should be expanded to include not only an ACT PLAN assessment score of at least a 15 on the English and math sub-sections, but also an equivalent ACT/SAT score, or a WorkKeys Bronze level score.
- 3) Request that the Legislature and others provide funding to maintain and expand effective supplemental counseling resources through all agencies, entities and school districts providing said services.
- 4) Avoid budget cuts or reductions that would negatively impact the implementation and/or expansion of counseling activities.

- 5) Urge the Department of Education and LEAs to prioritize counseling and partnerships to better inform students of postsecondary and career and technical education opportunities.
- 6) Design a state-supported Technical Workforce Grant that would support students who are seeking to pursue high-quality, post-secondary training. This would be a distinct industry based award that is based on a students' performance in a technical workforce area. Eligibility requirements could be designed to match industry demands with students' interests and capabilities.
- 7) The Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education do not recommend lowering the required ACT score or allowing HiSET recipients to be eligible for the TOPS Tech award.
- 8) Efforts should be aimed at developing innovative strategies to promote the technical workforce award that address and dispel the fundamental misconceptions about career and technical education. These efforts should leverage all the individual statewide activities that are going on surrounding marketing and branding.