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Louisiana schools get a chance to shine

State’s new grading system rewards for student growth

BY PATRICK WALL
Staff writer

Principal Jenenne Coulon was observing a teacher’s lesson last month when text messages came pouring in. School grades had been released.

For Louisiana educators, the annual school ratings can inspire delight or dread — a year’s worth of grueling work condensed to a single A-F grade, which the public often sees as shorthand for whether a given school is “good” or “bad.” This year was especially nerve-wracking as the state issued, in addition to schools’ official grades, simulated scores based on a tougher rating system that takes effect next year.

Coulon ran back to her office at Judge Lionel R. Collins Elementary School and pulled up the grades. The Marrero school, where about 90% of students are economically disadvantaged, had seen its rating fall to a D last year after taking in about 100 students from two shuttered campuses. But this year, things drastically improved: Not only did Collins land on the state’s list of top-growing schools, boosting its official rating to a C, but its simulated grade was a B — the highest in Coulon’s decade leading the school.

She shrieked and cried, then collected herself before making a schoolwide announcement. Finally, the grade reflected the school she knows, where educators strive with each lesson, tutoring session and pep talk to push students steadily forward.

“I felt vindicated,” Coulon said. “We work so hard over here, and now it’s showing up in the accountability system.”

For most schools, the simulated scores were a worrying preview of challenges ahead. Hundreds of campuses, including 75% of the state’s high schools, would have earned lower grades under the new rating system than the current one, which ends this year.

Yet just over 130 public schools, or about 10% of the total, defied the trend. Those campuses, almost all elementary or middle schools, managed to get higher grades under the tougher system.

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STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE
Judge Lionel R. Collins Elementary Principal Jenenne Coulon walks with second grader Indie Girard at the school in Marrero on Wednesday.



STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL DUNLAP
Angie Roches pours boiled crawfish into a container at University Seafood on Saturday. The 2026 crawfish season in south Louisiana looks like it will be normal, according to LSU AgCenter crawfish extension agent Todd Fontenot.

BRING ON THE BOIL

State’s residents and restaurants prepare for ‘optimistic’ crawfish season

BY JOANNA BROWN
Staff writer

After a moderately dry and warm fall season, crawfish are starting to emerge from their burrows and land in boiling pots across Acadiana.

Todd Fontenot, an LSU AgCenter crawfish extension agent based in Acadia Parish, said he is “optimistic for the season” — although he resists delving into prediction, saying that the lifecycle of these crustaceans is extremely weather-dependent.

“We’re expecting a normal season, barring any adverse weather conditions,” he said. “Last year, we were very fortunate. We had some severe cold, very short-lived, and a record-breaking snow, and fortunately we came out of all that really well. But those kinds of things can change your season, practically overnight.”

Last January, historic blizzard conditions in Louisiana dropped up to 10 inches of snow in the Lafayette area, around 7 inches in Baton Rouge and the highest recorded total of over 13 inches near Grand Coteau.

Fontenot said the anomalous snowfall, stretching across the heart of crawfish country, had little impact on last year’s season, beyond delaying the emergence of some crawfish.

“We were very fortunate that hit when it did,” he said. “Last year, our yields were definitely not record-breaking, but much better than the year of the drought.”

During summer 2023, intense heat and extremely low precipitation across the state



FILE PHOTO BY LEE BALL
During last year’s season, area restaurants were pricing a 3-pound platter from \$25 to \$35 at the end of January.

“We’re expecting a normal season, barring any adverse weather conditions.”

TODD FONTENOT,
LSU AgCenter crawfish extension agent

led to \$290 million in agricultural losses, according to professors Paul Miller and Matt Hiatt, of the Department of Oceanography & Coastal Science at LSU.

Southwest Louisiana experienced moderate drought conditions again this year in the late summer and fall, but there is little reason for concern regarding the upcoming season, said Fontenot.

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Life spans in La. on the rise

COVID recovery boosts rates, according to federal data

BY EMILY WOODRUFF
Staff writer

Life expectancy in Louisiana is rising, rebounding from the deadliest early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new federal data that shows the state still has far to go in catching up to the average life span for the rest of the U.S.

A child born in Louisiana is expected to live 73.8 years, according to a report released Friday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that used data from 2022. That figure is up 1.6 years from the previous year’s report, outpacing the national average increase of 1.1 years.

Despite the gain, Louisiana still ranks 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Only Kentucky, Mississippi and West Virginia reported lower life expectancy, according to state life tables released by the National Center for Health Statistics on Thursday. The U.S. average is 77.5, and states such as Hawaii, Massachusetts and New Jersey are around 80 years.

Thomas LaVeist, dean of the Tulane School of Public Health, said the improvement is good news, even if it may be due to starting at such a low point.

“The states that have had the biggest improvement are the states in the southeast, which are the states that have the worst health profile in the nation,” LaVeist said.

The gains reflect a decline in COVID-19 deaths along with fewer drug overdose deaths, said report authors. Louisiana, as one of the states with higher COVID deaths and soaring overdose deaths, had much lost ground to make up for.

Still, the gains did not erase long-standing health disadvantages. Louisiana’s life expectancy remains nearly four years lower than the U.S. average and more than six years behind states with the longest life spans.

Men in Louisiana continue to fare worse than women when it comes to life span. In 2022, Louisiana men had a life expectancy of 70.6 years, ranking second to last nationally.

Women had an average life expectancy of 77.2 years. The six-and-a-half-year gap between men and women in Louisiana mirrors

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GOP senator advocates releasing video of boat strike

Some experts criticize U.S. actions near Venezuela

BY BILL BARROW
Associated Press

A video of a U.S. military strike on an alleged drug boat in the Caribbean that killed two survivors of the initial attack shows “nothing remarkable,” the Republican

who leads the Senate Intelligence Committee said Sunday, and he would not oppose its public release if the Pentagon were to declassify it.

Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, who backs President Donald Trump’s campaign against suspected drug smugglers, is partially aligning himself with Trump and top Democrats in favor of releasing the video of the Sept.



Cotton

2 attack. It was the first in what has become a monthslong series of American strikes on vessels near Venezuela that the administration says were ferrying drugs. At least 87 people have been killed in 22 known strikes.

But Cotton, among the top lawmakers on national security committees who were briefed Thursday by the Navy admiral

commanding those strikes, is splitting with Democrats over whether military personnel acted lawfully in carrying out a second strike to kill the two survivors. The nine others aboard the boat also were killed.

“I think it’s really important that this video be made public. It’s not lost on anyone, of course, that the interpretation of the video ... broke down precisely on

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