




# MOVING FROM BUDGET CUTS TO STATE INVESTMENTS:

## A BLUEPRINT FOR A STRONGER LOUISIANA

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## Moving from Budget Cuts to State Investments: A Blueprint for a Stronger Louisiana

Louisiana's tax system is broken. It doesn't bring in enough revenue to pay for the things that allow communities to thrive- strong schools, good hospitals and public safety. It taxes people with low incomes at higher levels than the rich. It doesn't keep up with economic growth. And it's riddled with special-interest exemptions and tax breaks.

It's time to trade the never-ending cycle of budget shortfalls for long-term stability that allows for new investments in Louisiana's communities. It can only happen with fundamental tax reform that meets some basic principles: **F**airness, **A**dequacy, **C**ompetitiveness, **T**imeliness and **S**ustainability.

### The Elements of Tax Reform

- Eliminating the deduction for federal taxes paid. Louisiana is one of only three states with this tax break. It costs the state nearly \$1 billion per year, and more than half the benefits flow to the richest 5 percent of households.
- Eliminating the "excess itemized" deduction that mainly goes to high-income households that itemize their federal taxes.
- Lowering the state sales tax from 5 percent to 4 percent. Louisiana's sales taxes are the highest in the country.
- Doubling the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) that encourages and rewards work.
- Reining in costly tax exemptions for items such as film subsidies and private-school tuition.

Making these common-sense reforms will allow Louisiana to meet its current obligations to students, families and health care providers while making new investments in priorities that can grow and sustain the middle class: college financial aid, early care and education, affordable housing and public safety.

When we get rid of the tax breaks that powerful groups have forced into our tax code, we'll be in a stronger position to move Louisiana forward. When we spend on fundamentals like quality education and modern infrastructure, we are investing in our state's prosperity. Which path will we take: the path toward thriving communities across our state or the path toward slow deterioration and a widening gap in quality of life? When we see schools crumbling, college costs going up, safety-net services getting cut and our communities struggling, all while a few at the top benefit from tax breaks, then we know our state's priorities are all off course. Now is the time to act.

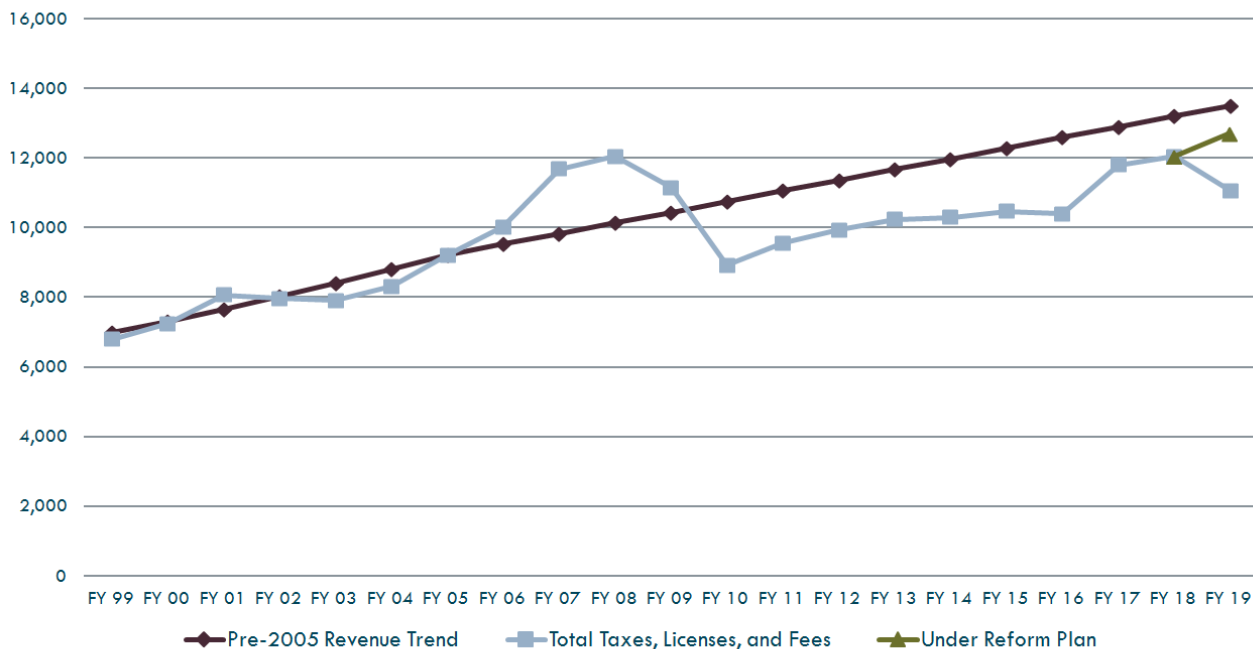
# INTRODUCTION

Louisianans come from many different walks of life, yet we share basic goals. From Shreveport to New Orleans; from Abbeville to Zwolle, people are working hard to provide a better life for themselves and their families. But many families struggle to make ends meet, to afford the basic necessities and to put a little money away so their children can have opportunities they never did.

In earlier times, Louisiana made public investments that helped support those dreams by building roads, hospitals, universities and by providing a basic safety net for those who fell on hard times. But in recent years, those investments have withered. Cuts to higher education are among the highest in the nation, and programs that support vulnerable children and families have been cut significantly.

Today, Louisiana is at a critical crossroads. Years of shortsighted tax and budget policies created an unsustainable situation, as the revenue state government collects is no longer enough to support core services, let alone make the kind of investments in families that are needed for the middle class to grow and prosper.<sup>1</sup>

**After post-Katrina bump, revenues down sharply (millions of dollars)**



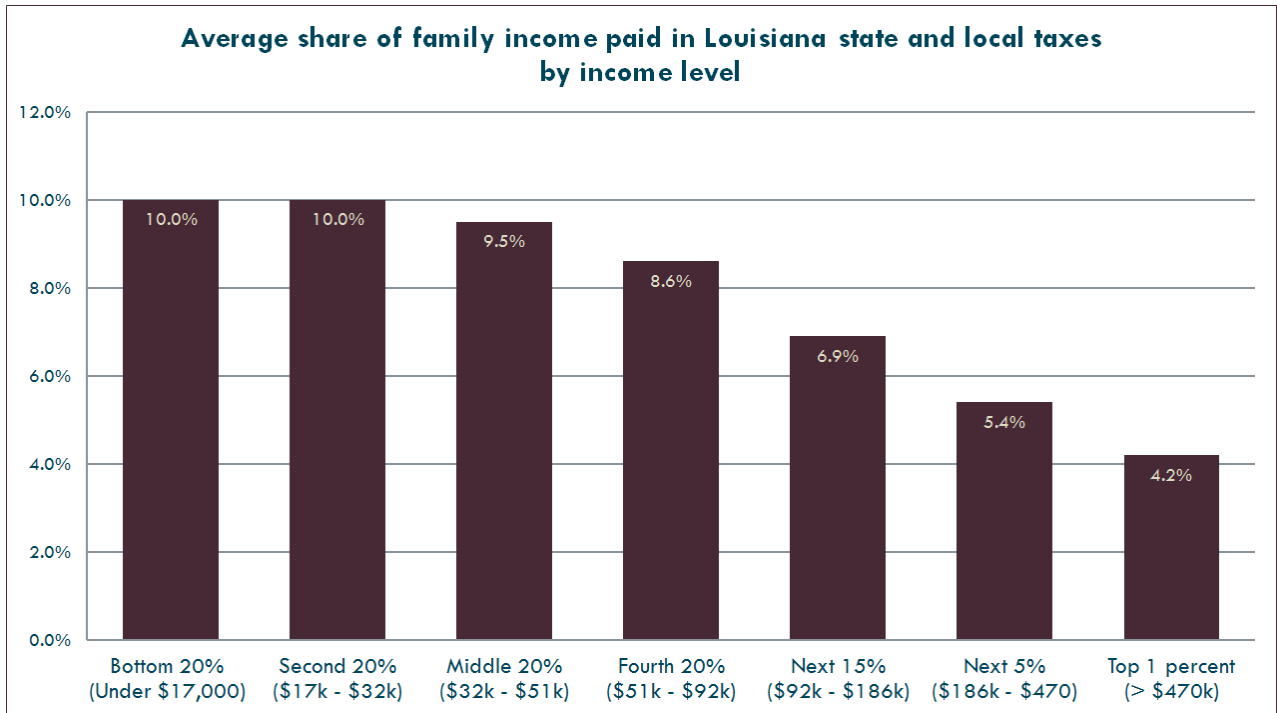
Source: Louisiana Legislative Fiscal Office, LBP analysis



To change this trajectory, Louisiana must reform its tax structure. This reform should meet a few basic principles:

- 1. Fairness.** Right now in Louisiana, the richest 1 percent of households pay state and local taxes at less than half the share of family income as those with earnings below \$51,000 per year. A

reformed tax structure needs to ensure that those who have fared the best in our economy pay a greater share than they do today, while those who are struggling to gain an economic foothold are given some relief.



Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2015)



2. **Adequacy.** Louisiana’s decision to pass a series of massive income-tax cuts in 2007 and 2008 helped create a series of chronic budget shortfalls. Recent, temporary increases in the state sales tax have not fixed the problem. A reformed tax structure needs to raise enough money to end the cycle of budget shortfalls and begin reinvesting in education, infrastructure and safety-net services that make families stronger.
3. **Competitiveness.** Long-term economic growth in Louisiana will require well-trained, highly educated workers. That, in turn, will require greater investments in education, starting in early childhood and continuing through college. If Louisiana does a better job educating and training workers, it will become a more attractive place for people to start or expand businesses.
4. **Timeliness.** Most of the revenue raised by tax changes made in 2015 and 2016 is temporary, and is due to expire in 2018 - the budget “cliff” that totals at least \$1.2 billion. The time for fundamental tax reform is now.
5. **Sustainability.** A reformed tax structure must ensure that we avoid the cliff and create a revenue system that grows over time along with the economy.<sup>2</sup> Louisiana needs to get away from the

cycle of annual shortfalls that have hurt our ability to expand the middle class. Even if we raise enough to avoid the cliff, the state is still on track to spend about \$1.5 billion less than it would had government continued to grow with the economy since 2005.<sup>3</sup>

In short, it’s time to shift the annual conversation from “what do we cut?” to “where can we invest to grow our economy and support our 21st century workforce needs?”

## ELEMENTS OF REFORM

In recent months, several groups have studied Louisiana’s tax structure and made recommendations for reform. The conservative Tax Foundation<sup>4</sup>, the Legislature’s Task Force on Structural Changes in Budget and Tax Policy<sup>5</sup> and a team of economists at Tulane and Louisiana State University<sup>6</sup> all reviewed the data and reached the same conclusion: Louisiana should eliminate costly and inefficient tax breaks in the state income tax, particularly the ability to deduct federal income taxes on state returns, while reducing the state sales tax and broadening its base to include services that are taxed in other states.

This proposal for reforming Louisiana’s tax structure begins with these same elements. Tax reform needs to do more than just fill a budget hole. The goal is not just to avert the 2018 fiscal cliff, but also to start re-investing in priorities too long neglected while meeting the principles of fairness, adequacy, competitiveness, timeliness and sustainability. That’s what these recommendations would do.

Tax change (compared to current base)	Revenue impact (million/year)
Eliminate federal income tax deduction	\$931
Eliminate excess itemized deduction	\$263
Lower sales tax to 4 percent, expand base	(\$475)
Double Earned Income Tax Credit	(\$49)
<b>Net New Revenue</b>	<b>\$670</b>

*Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2016), Louisiana Department of Revenue*

These tax changes, if enacted together, would raise an estimated **\$670 million** per year above current collections, even while lowering taxes for 60 percent of Louisianans. After accounting for natural growth in spending due to inflation<sup>7</sup>, that would leave **\$371 million** that could be invested in universities, reduce the waiting list for community-based services for people with disabilities or defray the cost of high quality child care for families that are struggling to make ends meet. The 2018 cliff would be averted and we’d now be only \$802 million below the pre-2005 revenue trend.

These changes would make Louisiana’s tax structure fairer by giving a net tax cut to 60 percent of Louisiana households while asking Louisiana’s richest households to pay a little more.<sup>8</sup> And by increasing our reliance on income taxes while lowering the sales tax, we would create a sustainable

system that is more likely to meet future revenue needs.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these changes, policymakers should take additional steps to shore up Louisiana's finances:

- Make permanent the reductions in tax credits from the 2015 session. Estimated revenue: **\$155 million**.<sup>10</sup>
- Eliminate the ability of corporations to deduct federal taxes on state returns. Estimated revenue: **\$215 million**.<sup>11</sup>
- An additional **\$92 million** could come in by eliminating a host of smaller exemptions.<sup>12</sup>
- Make the cap on Louisiana's Motion Picture Investor Tax Credit permanent. Creating a \$100 million "front-end" cap (the amount of credits issued in a year), and instituting a \$150 million "back-end" cap (the amount of credits redeemed in a year). Estimated revenue: **\$30 million** in initial years as outstanding credits are redeemed, then growing to **\$80 million** in annual savings over time.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, these changes would be permanent, giving businesses and families the confidence that Louisiana can pay its bills for years to come instead of lurching from crisis to crisis.

## BACKGROUND

From the 1930s to the early 1980s, state government in Louisiana was financed under a de-facto deal with the oil and gas industry: Taxes from mineral extraction would finance much of state government, and taxes on families would be kept relatively low as a result. But when world oil prices fell in the mid-1980s, that deal fell apart and budgeting became much more difficult. From the 1980s "Oil Bust" through the early 2000s, Louisiana tried increasingly creative ways to make up the revenue once provided by oil and gas: A state lottery, casino gambling, "temporary" sales taxes and loopholes in federal Medicaid reimbursement rules.

In 2002, a state representative from Lake Charles named Vic Stelly championed a tax package in the Legislature that was passed and subsequently ratified by voters that November. The "Stelly Plan" eliminated the state sales tax on food, drugs and residential utilities in exchange for two changes to the individual income tax: Elimination of the ability to claim "excess" federal itemized deductions on state returns and a compression of brackets so that the middle- and top rates kicked in at lower income levels.<sup>14</sup>

The Stelly Plan helped make the tax code fairer by reducing the regressive sales tax and increasing income taxes for high earners. In the years following its enactment, revenues grew along with the state economy. But in 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated much of south Louisiana. Soon after that, Louisiana experienced an unprecedented surge in state revenues as federal rebuilding dollars, increased economic activity, insurance proceeds and record energy prices produced a string of large annual budget surpluses.<sup>15</sup>

It was in this environment that the Legislature made the mistake, in 2007 and 2008, to repeal the income-tax part of the Stelly reforms (the sales tax changes are in the state constitution). These

changes, along with an elimination of sales taxes on business utilities, reduced state revenue collections by nearly \$1 billion per year and set the stage for budget challenges that lay ahead.<sup>16</sup> By 2010, state revenue was \$3.1 billion below the 2008 peak and \$1.8 billion below its pre-2005 trend.<sup>17</sup>

The income-tax cuts and unchecked growth of tax exemptions combined to create a period of instability for the state budget that continues to the present day. Tax revenues are consistently less than the state’s financial obligations to schools, the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) scholarship program, hospitals and public safety. This is what is known as Louisiana’s “structural budget deficit.” And while the national economic downturn and the regional recession exacerbated Louisiana’s fiscal problems, they did not cause them. In short: if you cut taxes and don’t replace the lost revenue, you’re going to have revenue shortfalls. It’s simple math.

### 2009-2016: Temporary patches

Ever since these changes were made, the state has struggled to pay its bills in a consistent manner. Under Gov. Bobby Jindal, Louisiana dealt with this structural deficit in two ways: By cutting the budget, and by filling the remaining gap through various gimmicks and one-time measures, such as diverting money from state accounts that were set aside for specific uses, selling state property and using temporary federal stimulus dollars to pay for ongoing obligations in health care and higher education.

The sources of “one-time money” varied from year to year, but the net effect was the same. Louisiana was running out of options to plug holes and turning a blind eye to the underlying structural problems in the tax code. In 2016, Louisiana mostly ended its reliance on “one-time” money in favor of bringing in new revenue sources to plug budget holes. But most of these revenue increases were temporary, including the largest one, a 1-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax.

#### One Time Dollars Used for Recurring Expenses

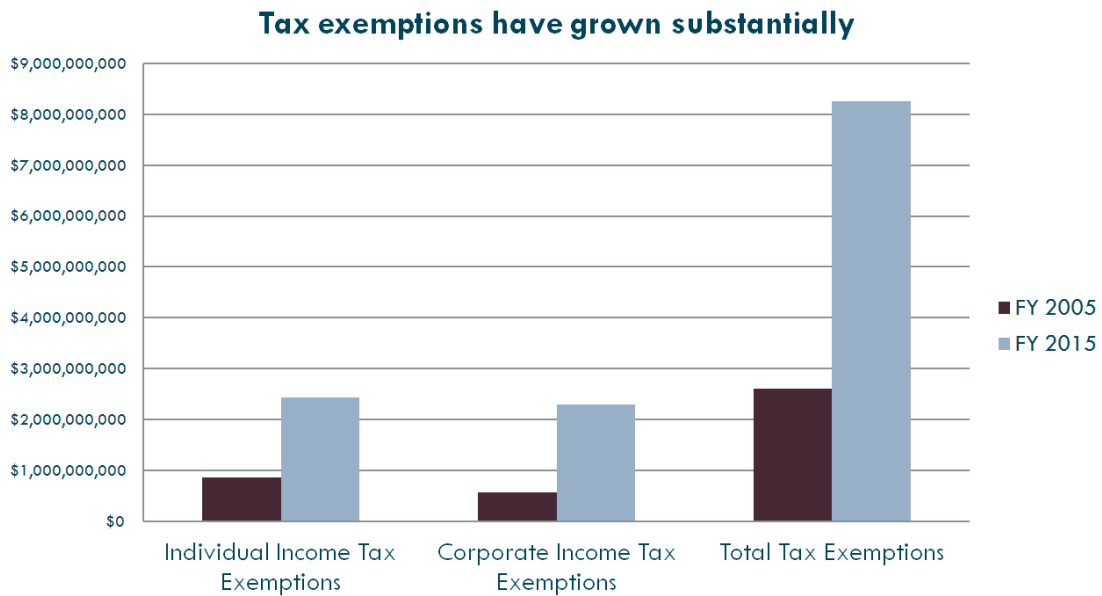
Fiscal Year	One-time money (\$ millions)
2011-12	\$548
2012-13	\$444
2013-14	\$583
2014-15	\$1,182
2015-16	\$826
2016-17*	\$35

\* = As of December 2016. Source: Legislative Fiscal Office; Division of Administration

### The growth of tax exemptions

The term “tax exemption” is used to describe the myriad exclusions, deductions, credits, deferrals and preferential tax treatments permitted by Louisiana’s tax code that reduce the amount of money the state has available to spend on education, health care, public safety and other important investments. These exemptions are government spending by another name since they have the same budgetary impact.

At the same time Louisiana's budget has shrunk as a percentage of the overall state economy, tax



Source: Louisiana Department of Revenue



exemptions have grown dramatically and now account for more than \$8 billion per year. While many exemptions serve a valid policy purpose (the EITC is notable for its proven anti-poverty impacts), there are numerous large tax breaks that primarily benefit wealthy individuals and corporations.

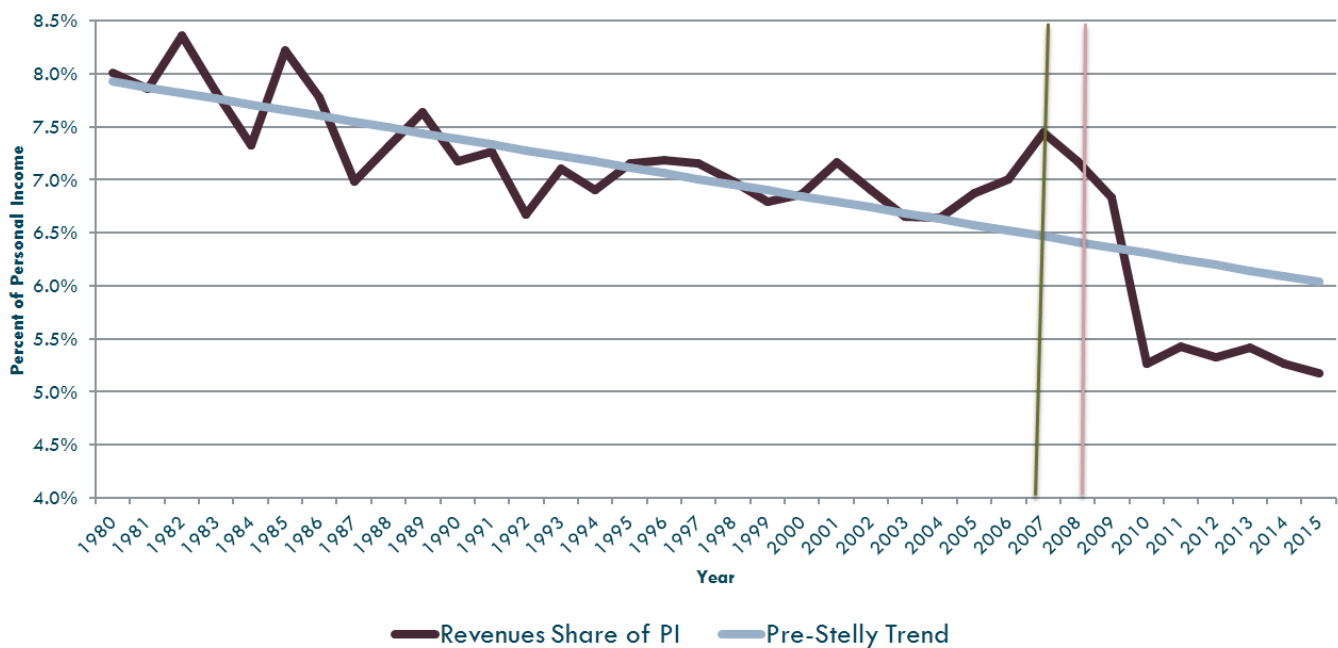
### Impact of slowdown in oil & gas industry

The dramatic decline in oil prices during an 18-month period starting in July 2014 led to a substantial reduction in mineral revenues to the state. But the downturn in Louisiana's energy sector is not the primary culprit of the state's long-term budget woes. Up until the end of 2015, overall employment in the oil and gas sector remained near its historical average and the state's fiscal problems stretch back to 2008. And Louisiana today is less reliant on mineral revenues than in decades past. Revenue as a share of both total personal income and gross state product plummeted following the Stelly repeal in 2007 and 2008. The prime driver of the state's budgetary problems is an unwillingness to match revenue with the state's spending priorities. LSU economist Greg Upton details this in a recent report:



...the fiscal challenges that Louisiana has faced over the past decade are not due to the oil and gas industry. These challenges are a result of systematic changes to the tax code that have decreased revenues as a share of economic activity. Two major tax changes have occurred in recent history. First, the Stelly Plan in 2002, that was meant to be revenue neutral and second a large tax decrease implemented during the post-Katrina boom in 2008. In the most recent fiscal year, fiscal year 2015, Louisiana's revenues accounted for less than 4.5 percent of the gross state product (GSP) and less than 5.5 percent of the state's personal income; these are lower levels than at any point in recent history...Simply put, changes to the state's tax code, not oil and gas prices, are the culprit for these yearly budgetary crises.<sup>18</sup>

### Total Louisiana tax revenues as percentage of total personal income dropped sharply after Stelly repeal



Source: Louisiana Legislative Fiscal Office, BEA via LSU Center for Energy Studies  
 Lines indicate dates of first and second phases of Stelly repeal



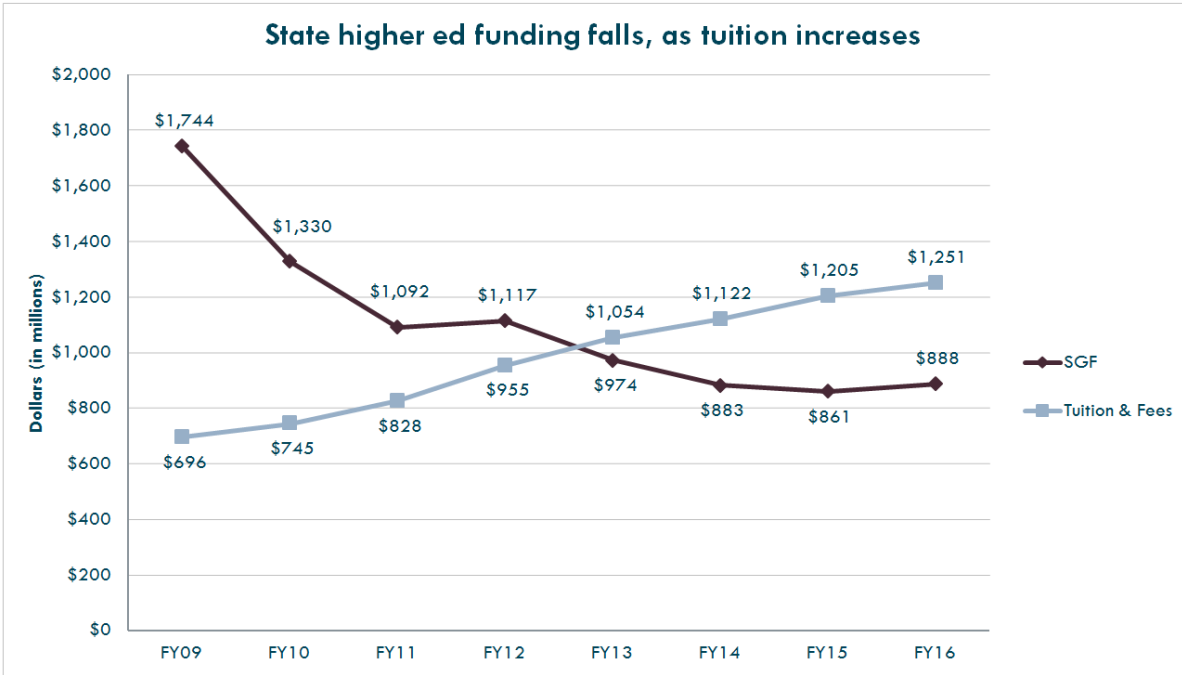
State policymakers should take steps to protect Louisiana's budget from swings in the oil market. One step in the right direction occurred in November 2016, when Louisiana voters took the prudent step of approving a Revenue Stabilization Fund. The fund will deposit a portion of severance tax revenues in a supplemental Rainy-Day fund during oil "boom" periods. This will serve to even out tax collections over boom and bust cycles, and mitigate the temptation for lawmakers to enact shortsighted tax breaks during the booms.<sup>19</sup>

# THE NEED FOR NEW INVESTMENTS

Louisiana can build a strong foundation for economic growth and promote jobs that enable people to do more than just make ends meet. In a time of slow economic growth, public investments are more critical than ever to grease the gears of the economy and to spur innovation. For example, public investment in education, transportation and public safety-services that businesses rely on heavily can improve long-term economic growth and job quality. But these investments have lagged in recent years due to budget constraints.

Tax reform is needed to rebalance this situation and move from a posture of cuts to one of investment. Targeted investments in services proven to promote a prosperous economy are needed. Louisiana should:

- Re-invest in students.** State funding for higher education has fallen by \$4,602 per student from 2008 to 2016, making it harder for students and their families to afford the cost of college and putting a college degree out of reach for many.<sup>20</sup> And for most of the last decade, state support for K-12 schools has been frozen, and per-student funding has declined when measured against inflation.<sup>21</sup> In today’s economy, some form of advanced education or training is not a luxury, it’s a requirement.



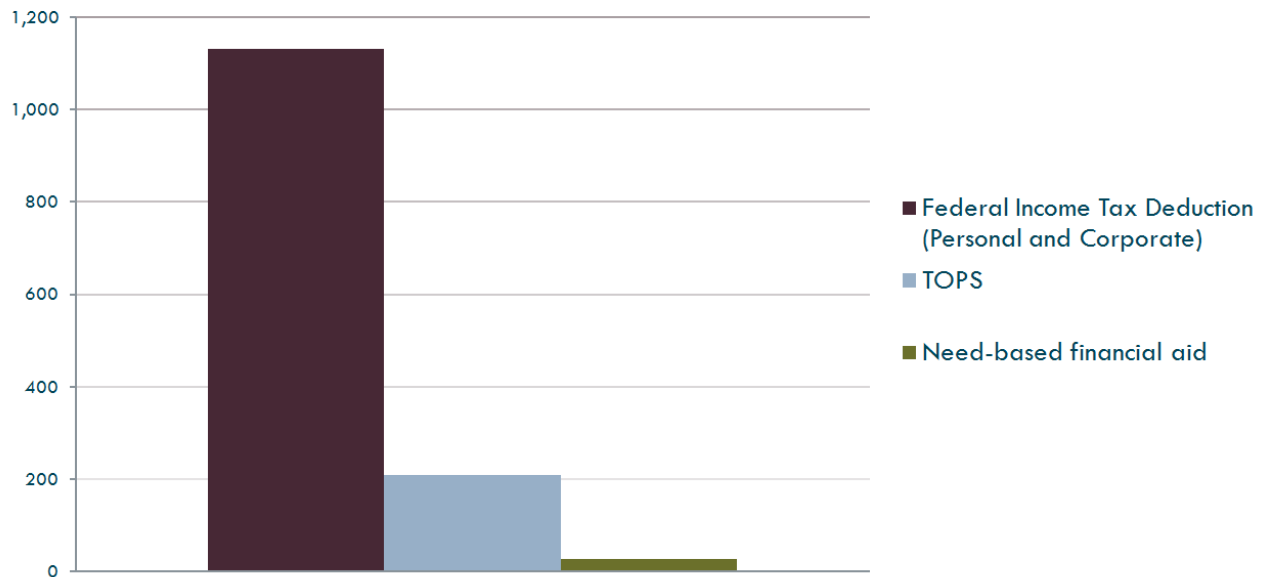
Source: Louisiana Board of Regents (Adjusted for Inflation)



- Bolster college aid.** Funding for TOPS was reduced in 2016-17 for the first time since the

program began, raising the cost of education for more than 50,000 students and families. State support for higher education is especially critical for students from modest backgrounds, who must rely on loans to make up for any loss of state support. As tuition has risen, funding for the need-based Go Grant program has been stuck at \$26.4 million, which is less than half of what's needed to provide aid for all eligible students.<sup>22</sup> Low-income students who qualify for merit-based TOPS scholarships also lose out when Go Grants are underfunded. Low-income students who receive TOPS and Go Grants are 39 percent more likely to graduate than those who only receive TOPS.<sup>23</sup>

### Cost of tax breaks vs. key education investments (in millions of dollars)



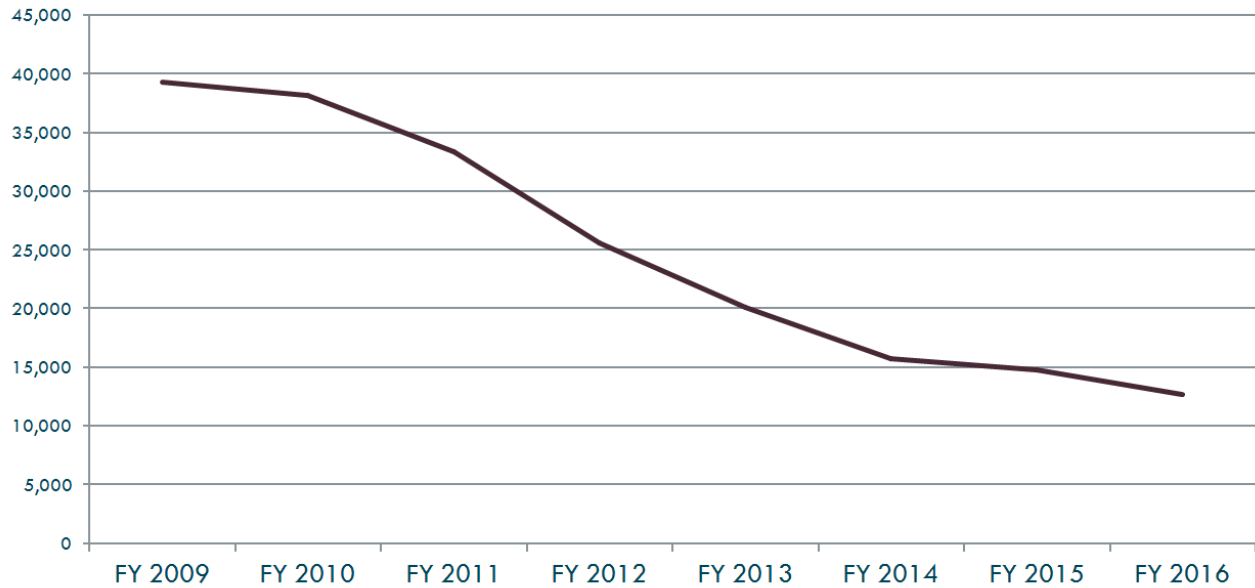
Source: Louisiana Department of Revenue, Division of Administration



- Support working families.** Louisiana has the third-highest rate of poverty in the country. The EITC is a refundable tax credit that boosts the income of low-paid workers with children. Research has shown that it is one of the most effective tools for fighting child poverty, as it gives people an incentive to work by boosting their take-home pay. Children in low-income families that claim the credit do better and go further in school, which allows them to work more and earn more as adults. Louisiana's state credit is currently 3.5 percent of the federal credit - the lowest in the country among the states that have the EITC. Doubling the credit to 7 percent would cost \$49 million per year, but this money would flow back into local communities as families spend their credit on basic necessities.<sup>24</sup>

- Invest in early care and education.** One of the best long-term investments is providing families with access to high-quality child care and education for children under 4. More than 40 percent<sup>25</sup> of Louisiana children are already behind their peers academically when they start kindergarten, yet overall funding for child-care assistance has fallen by almost 70 percent since 2009 and the state currently spends no general-fund dollars for this purpose.<sup>26</sup> Any investments made in high-quality child care programs for low-income children will pay dividends over time; studies have shown up to a \$13 return on every dollar invested in quality early care and education.<sup>27</sup>

**Number of children enrolled in Louisiana's Child Care Assistance Program has fallen sharply**

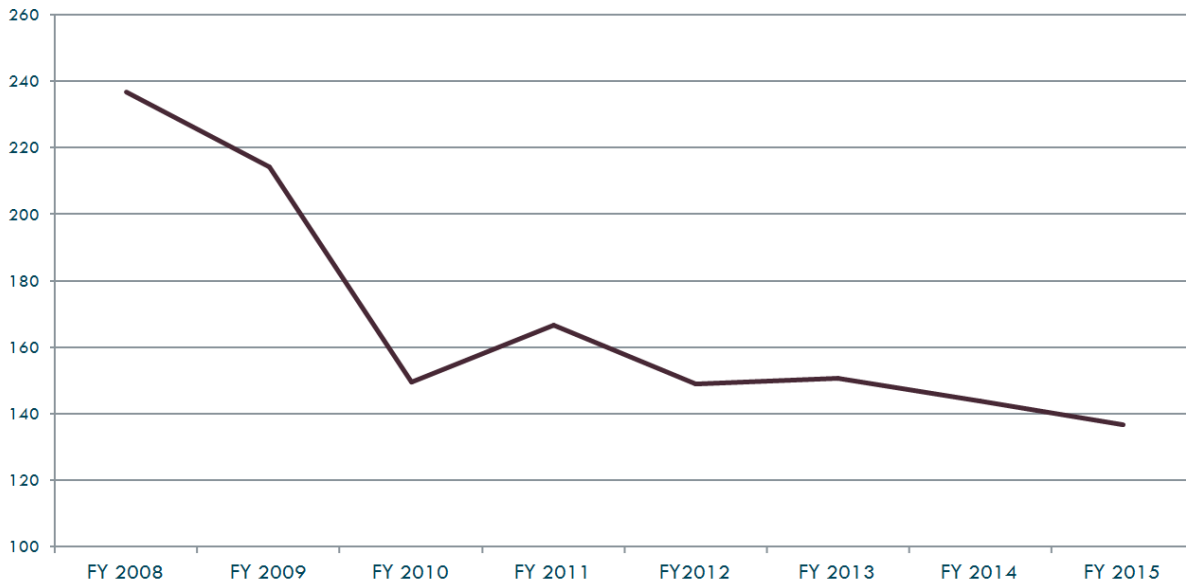


Source: Louisiana Department of Education via Louisiana Policy Institute for Children



- Strengthen the safety net.** The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has seen its budget cut nearly in half since 2008, which threatens the state's ability to care for some of its most vulnerable residents. Front-line workers who investigate child-abuse allegations and oversee foster-care programs have seen their jobs eliminated, and caseloads for the workers who remain are well above national and state standards.<sup>28</sup> Restoring the budget for DCFS will also allow the department to reallocate federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families dollars to its core purposes of direct assistance, child care assistance and work programs.<sup>29</sup>

**Department of Children and Family Services budget down  
(SGF, in millions of dollars)**



Source: House Fiscal Division

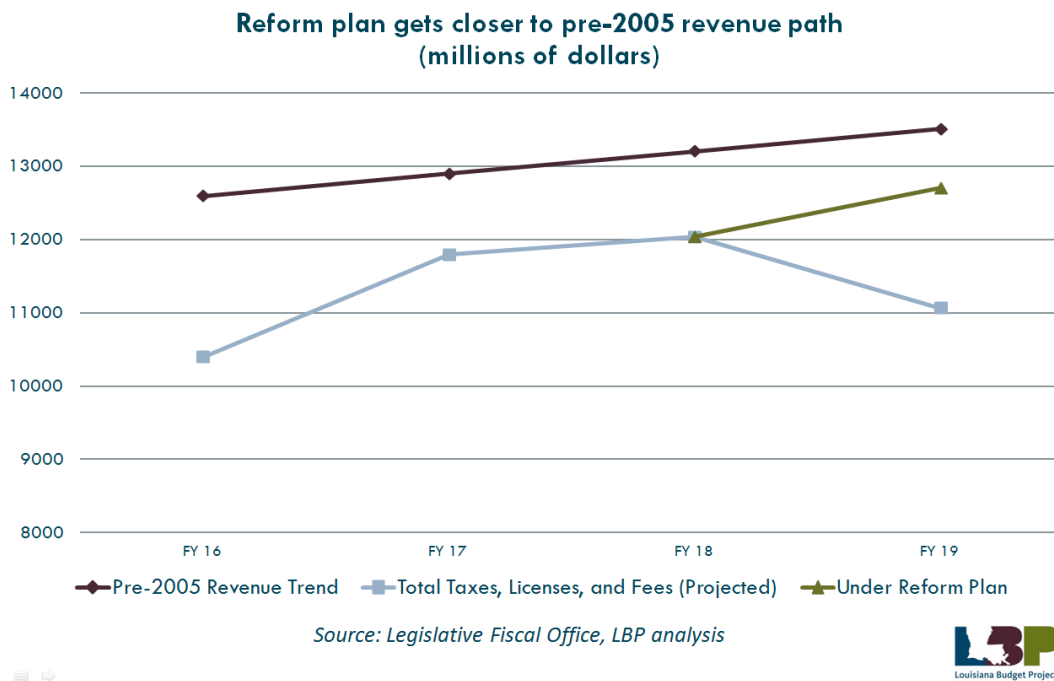


- **Help people afford a roof over their head.** The Louisiana Housing Trust Fund, which subsidizes construction and rehabilitation of housing for low-income families, received a one-time allocation of \$25 million in 2007 and has received nothing since then.<sup>30</sup> Yet the need for quality, affordable housing continues to grow. A shortage of 107,438 affordable housing units exists for extremely low-income people. The state housing wage, the wage needed to afford a fair market rent two-bedroom apartment, is \$15.81 per hour, more than twice the minimum wage.<sup>31</sup> Access to affordable housing is even more important in the aftermath of the historic flooding of 2016.
- **Expand access to health care.** While Louisiana has taken advantage of federal financing to expand its Medicaid program to more than 400,000 low-income adults, many of our most vulnerable citizens are still without needed services.<sup>32</sup> More than 50,000 people who are elderly, or who suffer from a disability, are on state waiting lists to receive Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS).<sup>33</sup>
- **Protect citizens' rights and promote public safety.** State budget shortfalls are also impacting those tasked with providing the constitutional right of counsel for people accused of crimes. Louisiana's failure to fund public defenders has left them uniquely dependent on local revenue from fees and fines.<sup>34</sup> In Caddo Parish, the budget crunch led the public defender's office to cut 12 attorney positions, leaving only 22 lawyers to handle more than 18,000 cases. In Lafayette

Parish, the public defender had to cut 47 of 65 attorneys. The wait list there has more than 4,500 defendants, many facing life in prison.<sup>35</sup> The state can also enhance public safety by investing in evidence-based practices to curb recidivism.<sup>36</sup>

## TRUE TAX REFORM

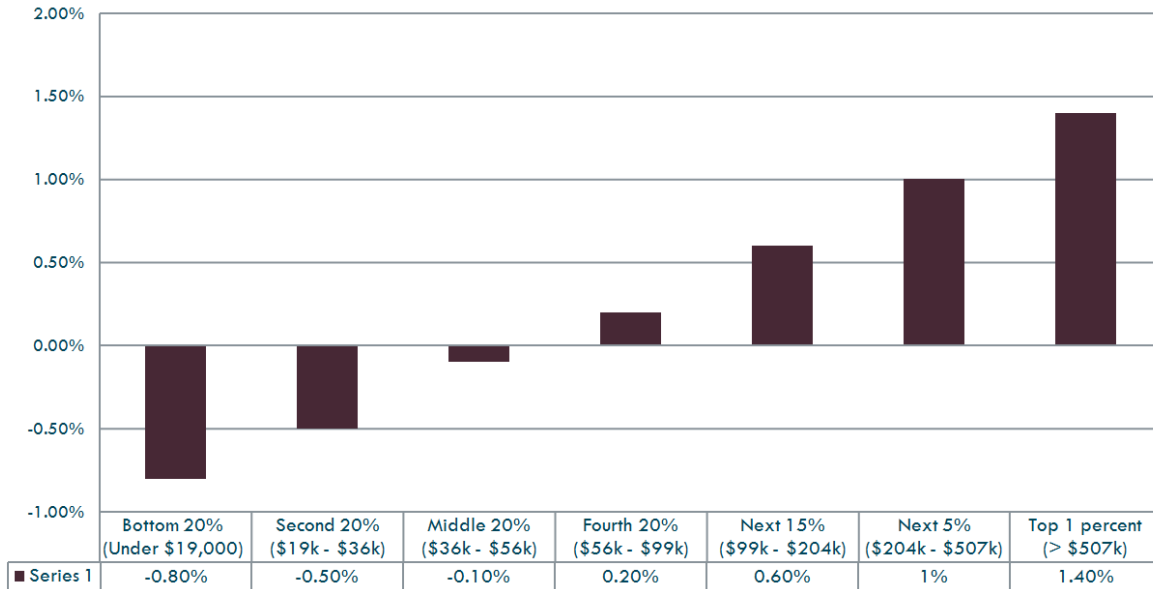
Creating a tax system that meets the goals of fairness, adequacy, competitiveness, timeliness and sustainability requires policymakers to make some difficult choices. But taking the easy way out, year after year, is what led to the current crisis and created the 2018 fiscal cliff.



Some of these recommendations are similar to what’s been proposed by others, including the Task Force on Structural Changes in Budget and Tax Policy and a team of economists from Louisiana State and Tulane universities. The crux of it involves raising personal income-tax revenues by eliminating tax breaks, and lowering the sales tax rate while broadening the base. Together, these changes would leave the state with **\$371 million** in new annual revenue to invest in education, health care and other priorities.

Adopting these proposals would also mean a net **tax cut for 60 percent of Louisianans**. The tax cut is due to the proposed lowering of the sales tax. Here’s how things would change.

## Majority of Louisianans' taxes would decrease



Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2016)



The Legislature could go beyond these revenue targets by eliminating a series of smaller tax exemptions costing \$92 million a year. Changes to the film tax credit program could reap \$30 million immediately and \$80 million over time, while making temporary decreases to a range of business tax incentives permanent could raise an extra \$155 million.

### Eliminate the deduction for federal income taxes paid

Louisiana is one of only three states (Iowa and Alabama are the others) that allow full deductibility of federal taxes on state returns.<sup>37</sup> The wealthiest 20 percent of Louisiana taxpayers reap 83 percent of the benefits of this tax break, which costs the state **\$931 million**<sup>38</sup> each year in lost revenue (the deductibility of corporate income taxes costs the state an additional **\$215 million**).<sup>39</sup> The federal deduction means Louisiana revenues are affected by changes in federal income tax rates. When the federal government cuts taxes, Louisiana income taxes rise, and when Washington raises income taxes it reduces revenues for Louisiana. In addition, the federal deduction can increase the amount of federal taxes some people pay, since they have less state taxes to deduct on their federal return. That means this break takes away revenue from Louisiana and sends it to the federal government.

In order to do away with this, voters will need to approve a Constitutional amendment.

### Eliminate the excess itemized deduction

Louisiana allows people who itemize on their federal tax return a state deduction in the amount equal to

their federal itemized deductions claimed minus the federal standard deduction. But only 24 percent of Louisiana tax filers itemize their federal returns, meaning most people don't benefit from this tax break.<sup>40</sup> Federal itemized deductions are designed to help defray a wide variety of expenditures, including charitable contributions, extraordinary medical expenses, mortgage interest payments and state and local taxes. But when the state provides a deduction on top of it, state revenues take a substantial hit while providing the greatest benefit to upper-income households- with little to no benefit for the middle- and low-income families. The wealthiest 20 percent of Louisianans take home 79 percent of the proceeds from this tax break, which is costing the state **\$263 million** each year.<sup>41</sup>

### Modernize the sales tax and lower the rate

With the sales tax increases in the 2016 special session, Louisianans currently pay the highest sales tax rate in the country, when state and local taxes are combined.<sup>42</sup> This is the main reason Louisianans at the bottom of the income ladder pay a much greater share of their income in taxes compared to those at the top, as low-income families typically spend much of what they earn.

Meanwhile, many of the services people buy in Louisiana are not subject to sales tax, even though they're taxed in other states: cable TV and internet, insurance, legal services and more.<sup>43</sup> With the numerous income tax deductions detailed above and the lack of sales tax on services, the overall sales tax rate remains high. Reducing the state sales tax from its current 5 percent to 4 percent, but retaining the expanded base from the 2016 special sessions and adding services taxed in other states, like Texas, to the base, would reduce sales tax collections by \$475 million compared to current levels.<sup>44</sup> This sales tax cut would make Louisiana's sales tax broader and more fair.

### Re-evaluate other tax breaks

A number of other exemptions make Louisiana's tax system unnecessarily complex and don't advance critical policy objectives:

Tax Break	Lost Revenue
Net Capital Gains	\$51 million
Elementary & Secondary School Tuition Deduction	\$22 million
Deduction for START Savings Program Contribution	\$2 million
\$25 Education Credit	\$17 million
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$92 million</b>

*Source: Louisiana Department of Revenue*

### Make temporary tax credit "haircuts" permanent

During the 2015 legislative session, legislators passed temporary 28 percent reductions for a suite of



tax credits.<sup>45</sup> Tax credits are meant to provide an incentive for various types of economic activity, but this incentive can remain in place without providing a full 100 percent subsidy. Making these changes permanent would mean \$155 million the state can invest in critical priorities.<sup>46</sup>

### Cap the Motion Picture Credit

Louisiana has spent more than \$1 billion subsidizing film productions around the state, with little permanent economic benefit to show.<sup>47</sup> In 2015, the Legislature imposed a temporary cap on the Motion Picture Investor Tax Credit, limiting credit redemption to \$180 million per year. But the Legislature did not cap the amount of credits that can be issued, which has the potential to create long-term liabilities for state taxpayers. Creating a \$100 million “front-end” cap (the amount of credits issued in a year) and instituting a \$150 million “back-end” cap (the amount of credits redeemed in a year) would end the open-ended subsidy permanently and bring the state **\$30 million** in initial years as outstanding credits are redeemed, growing to **\$80 million** in annual savings over time.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Taxes are the price we citizens pay in order to have good schools, safe communities, a clean environment and access to health care. These investments can bolster the economy and move us toward broad prosperity. Some policymakers insist that we can cut our way to prosperity. Yet multiple commissions, task forces and consultants have looked at these issues. The major takeaway: while it’s always possible to increase efficiency on the margins, the budget is already cut to the bare bones. There aren’t huge pots of money in the budget available to cut. In fact, there are numerous unmet needs. Instead of talking about what to cut, the conversation should be focused on where we can invest.

By implementing these reforms, we can start a new day in Louisiana. Instead of losing students, teachers, good roads and businesses to budget uncertainty, we can invest in our future. The time is now to get real tax reform done and put ourselves on a sustainable revenue path.

As legislators search for solutions, they should remember that the budget is not simply a collection of numbers. It’s a statement of priorities, a moral document that tells citizens what matters most. And in a state with high rates of poverty and low rates of educational attainment, the top priority should be to give struggling families the tools they need to reach the middle class and beyond.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, revenue refers to total state taxes, licenses and fees unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> The Task Force on Structural Changes in Budget and Tax Policy, "Louisiana's Opportunity," January 27, 2017, [http://revenue.louisiana.gov/Miscellaneous/FINAL\\_REPORT\\_-\\_Task\\_Force\\_on\\_Structural\\_Changes\\_in\\_Budget\\_and\\_Tax\\_Policy\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_VERSION.pdf](http://revenue.louisiana.gov/Miscellaneous/FINAL_REPORT_-_Task_Force_on_Structural_Changes_in_Budget_and_Tax_Policy_FINAL_WEB_VERSION.pdf)

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Drenkard, The Tax Foundation, "A Strong Fiscal Plan for Louisiana," February, 23, 2016, <https://taxfoundation.org/strong-fiscal-plan-louisiana>

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