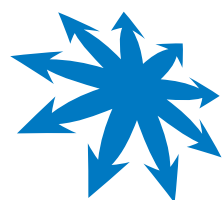


PUBLIC EDUCATION  
IN THE BATON ROUGE AREA:

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# PERCEPTION, REALITY & REFORM



Baton Rouge Area Chamber®

## **Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area Summary of 5-Part Research Series**

### **Part 1: An Overview of School Districts and Student Achievement**

The 11 public school districts in the Baton Rouge area—Ascension, Baker, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge, West Feliciana, and Zachary—vary widely in terms of size, demographic makeup, student achievement, and district performance. Across all districts at-risk students (those receiving free and reduced lunches) tend to achieve lower test scores than their counterparts. As such, while the Capital Region includes many of the highest and lowest ranked districts in the state, no district appears to be performing particularly well once differences in at-risk student populations are taken into account. Across the Baton Rouge area, 40 percent of students fail to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, including one in four students in our top ranked districts.

### **Part 2: Where We Stand Relative to Our Peer Regions**

Baton Rouge area school districts generally lag their counterparts in selected regions across the southern U.S. in terms of student achievement. However, public schools in the Capital Region also serve a much larger proportion of at-risk students than those in peer regions. As with individual districts, the Capital Region as a whole appears to be performing roughly in line with the general trend based on variation in at-risk student populations. Nevertheless, our weak standing relative to other regions negatively impacts the decisions of companies and individuals on whether to relocate to our area, start or expand businesses, and employ local workers.

### **Part 3: Factors That Impact Student Achievement**

Student achievement is impacted by a number of factors that schools directly control (“in-school factors”) and other issues that are traditionally considered outside the direct purview of schools (“non-school factors”). Our school districts appear to compare fairly well to their counterparts in other regions on most in-school factors such as teacher quality. Unfortunately, our region’s relatively high poverty levels suggest that we compare poorly on most non-school factors such as parental involvement. Given that young people typically spend only 13 percent of their waking hours in school from birth through age 18, it will take a broad-based approach addressing both in-school and non-school factors—for our public schools to achieve nationally competitive results.

### **Part 4: Public Perceptions vs. Reality**

Views on the performance of public schools vary widely from district to district in the Capital Region. In fact, public perceptions correlate remarkably closely with objective measures of district performance. Furthermore, public opinions are linked to voter preferences, with greater interest in electing new school board members in lower-rated districts. Finally, citizens across the Capital Region seem to understand that both in-school and non-school factors have a profound influence on student achievement, encouraging a broad-based approach to school reform.

### **Part 5: An Agenda for Reform**

Basic reform principles and initiatives, if passionately and rigorously implemented, could result in significant improvements in student achievement. Accordingly, BRAC has identified 28 practical, evidence-based models for improving student achievement (with estimates of cost and impact), offering a menu of ideas for making our public school systems stronger and more effective. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are at continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge area.

To view the entire research series, please visit [www.brac.org/public\\_education](http://www.brac.org/public_education).

RESEARCH SERIES 

July 27, 2006 • Part 1 of 5



**Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area:**  
An Overview of School Districts and Student Achievement  
(Part 1 of a 5-part series)

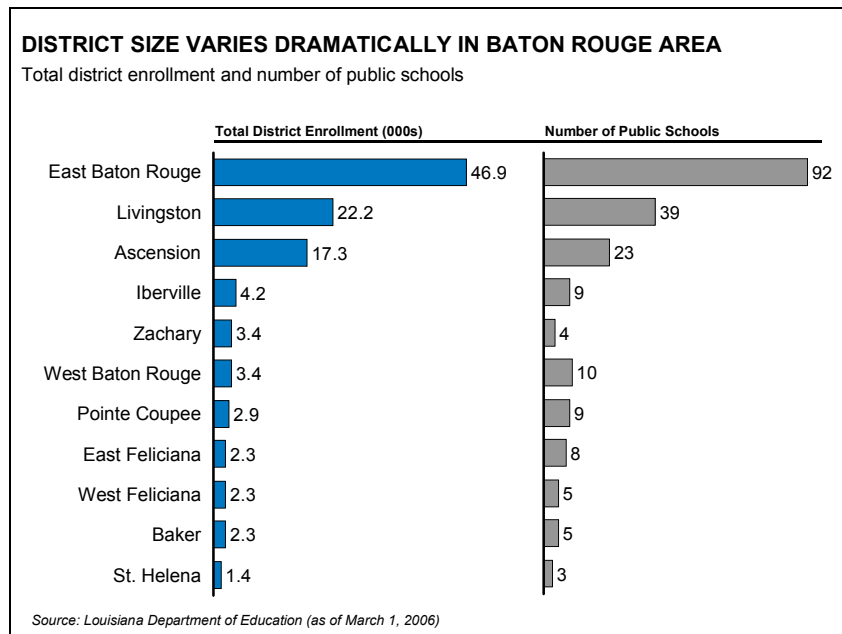
On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their public school districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) has initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts in the region. As individuals and companies frequently look to the quality of public education as a major factor in market evaluation, BRAC recognizes the importance of this issue to economic development. Education is intrinsically tied to workforce development and capacity, including literacy and knowledge of basic skills, and is a fundamental driver of economic prosperity.

The first part of the research series provides an overview of student achievement and district performance in the Baton Rouge area. It examines the standard indicators of performance to show how district rankings are determined. Furthermore, this study also looks more closely at the district contexts that lie behind the rankings, presenting and comparing demographic trends and statistics across school districts.

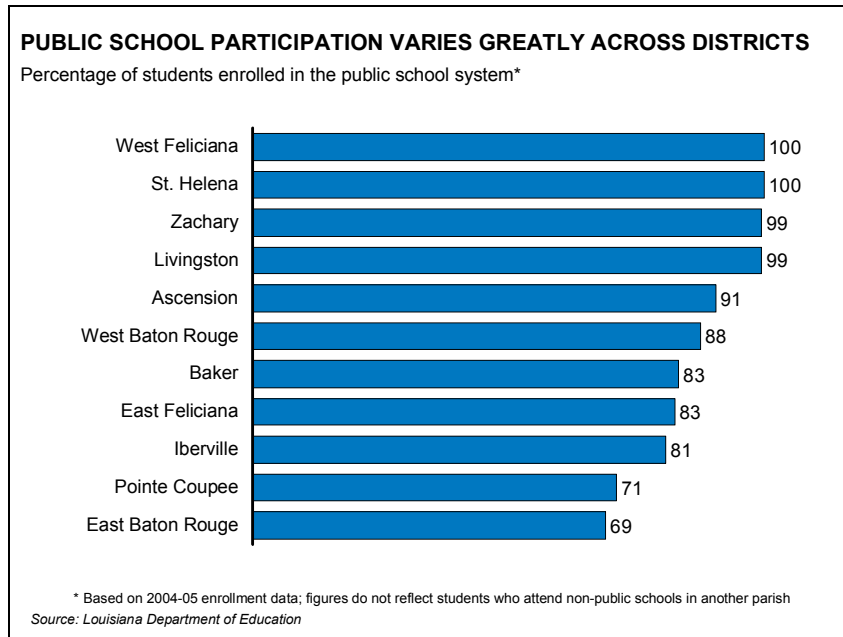
### Public Education in the Baton Rouge Area

There are 11 school districts in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area: Ascension, the City of Baker, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge, West Feliciana, and Zachary Community. All are governed by school boards, and all members are up for reelection on September 30, 2006.

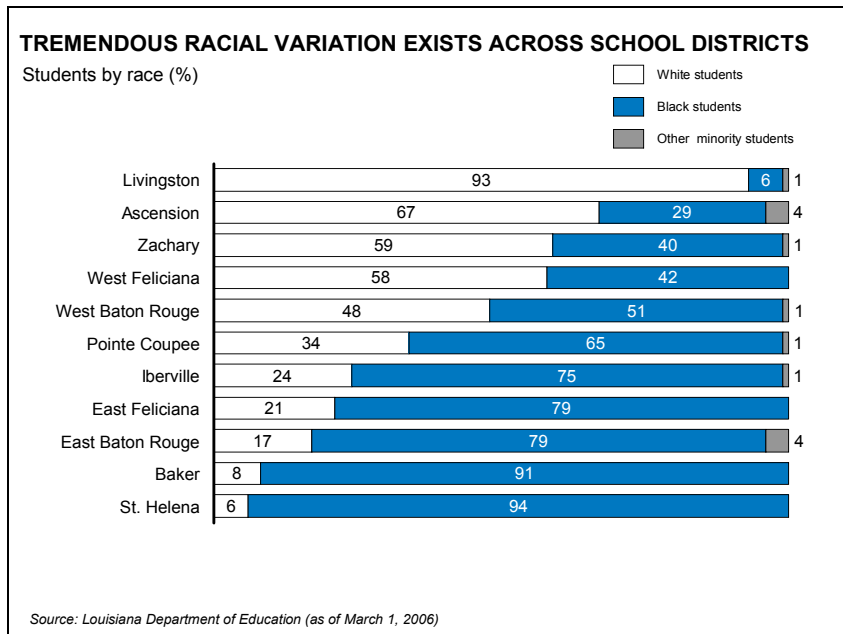
The school districts differ significantly along a number of dimensions. For example, East Baton Rouge is by far the largest school district in the area, serving nearly 47,000 students, while enrollment in St. Helena is less than 1,400.



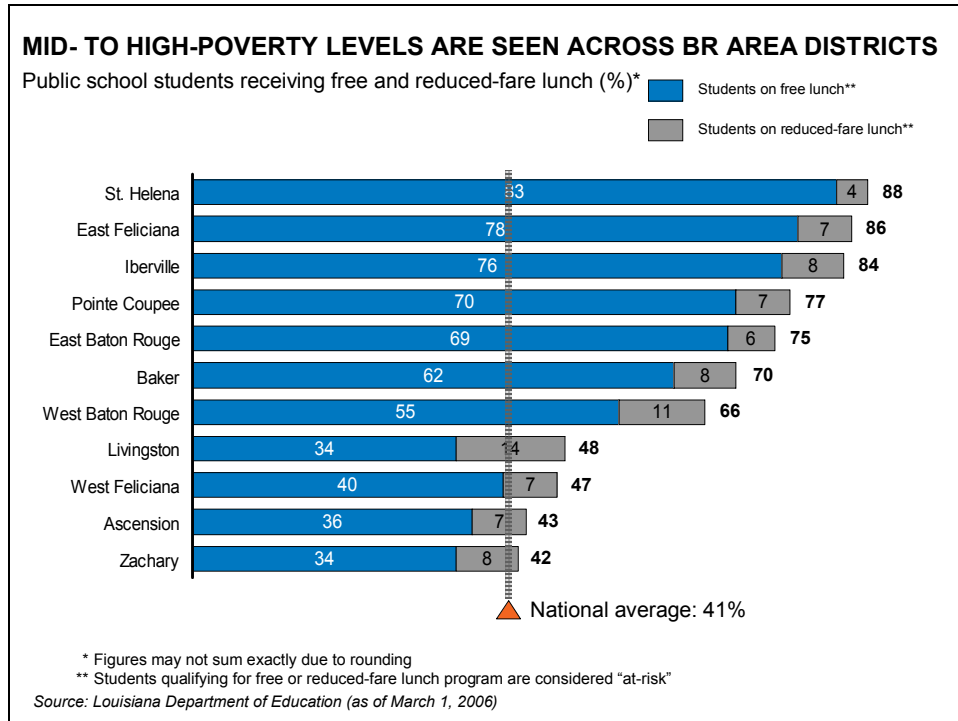
In several school districts all students attend public schools, while nearly one-third of all students in East Baton Rouge attend nonpublic schools, based on pre-Katrina figures. In some parishes, there are no private schools, while other areas have an extensive network of nonpublic schools. Some students cross parish lines for this reason.



Racial composition also varies tremendously across the 11 districts. For example, while 93 percent of students in Livingston are white, 94 percent of students in St. Helena are black. Other minority groups represent a very small portion of public school enrollments.



Poverty is high among students throughout the Baton Rouge area, as reflected in the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-fare lunch from the federal government, also known as “at-risk” students. In three districts—East Feliciana, Iberville, and St. Helena—at least four out of five students are considered at-risk and receive free or reduced-fare lunch. Students receiving assistance constitute less than 50 percent of the student population in Ascension, Livingston, West Feliciana, and Zachary, but numbers remain above the national average of 41 percent in all districts.



### Student Achievement and School Performance

The Louisiana Department of Education annually ranks schools using a School Performance Score (SPS) and ranks school districts based on a composite District Performance Score (DPS). The SPS and DPS are determined by assessing student test scores, attendance, and drop-out rates. Tests include:

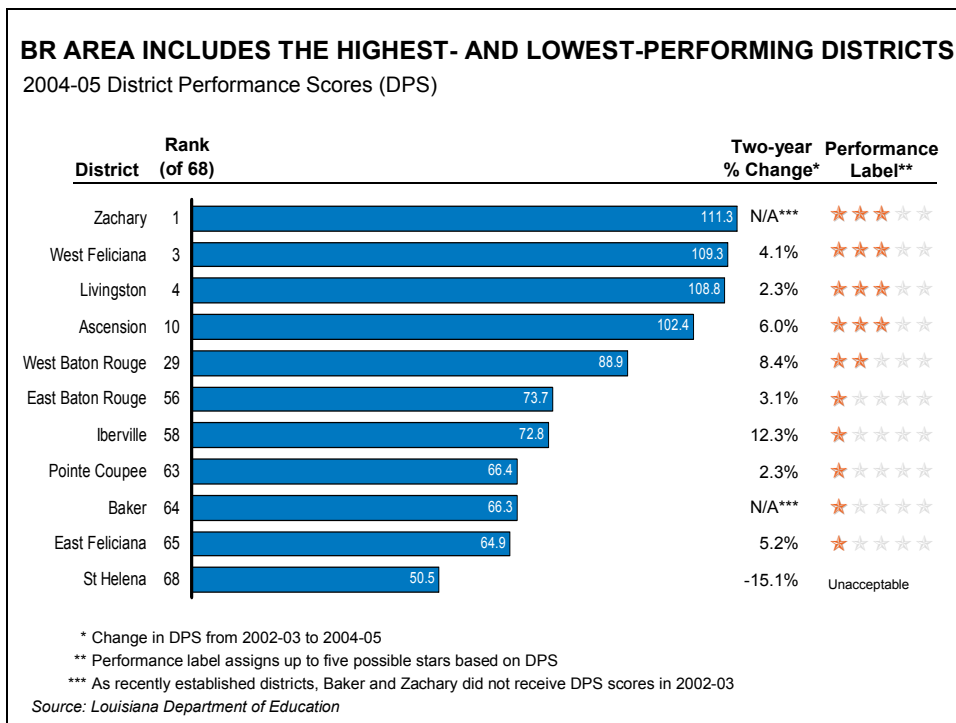
- Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (LEAP) – 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades
- Graduation Exit Examination for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (GEE) – 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades
- Iowa tests – 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades

Test scores constitute 90% of the SPS and DPS, while attendance and drop-out rates constitute 5% each.

Using the District Performance Scores from the 2004-2005 school year, a wide range of high and low performance can be observed across the Baton Rouge area. Four districts

rank among the top ten in the state—Ascension, Livingston, West Feliciana, and Zachary—while another six districts fall among the bottom fifteen—Baker, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, and St. Helena. West Baton Rouge is the only district near the middle of the pack, ranking 29 out of 68 districts in the state.

Annual performance improvements or declines are also tracked. In the Baton Rouge area, Iberville and West Baton Rouge achieved the highest growth in performance over the past two years, while one district—St. Helena—actually regressed.



Although some Baton Rouge area districts rank very high and others very low, there is significant variation among individual schools within districts. In Ascension, for example, Oak Grove Primary School scored a 130.6 in 2004-05, while two other elementary schools—Donaldsonville Primary and Lowery—received a SPS of only 63.1. Furthermore, some schools within low-ranking districts are among the best performing in the state. In East Baton Rouge, for example, seven schools scored a SPS of over 100 with Baton Rouge High leading the district at 171.4.

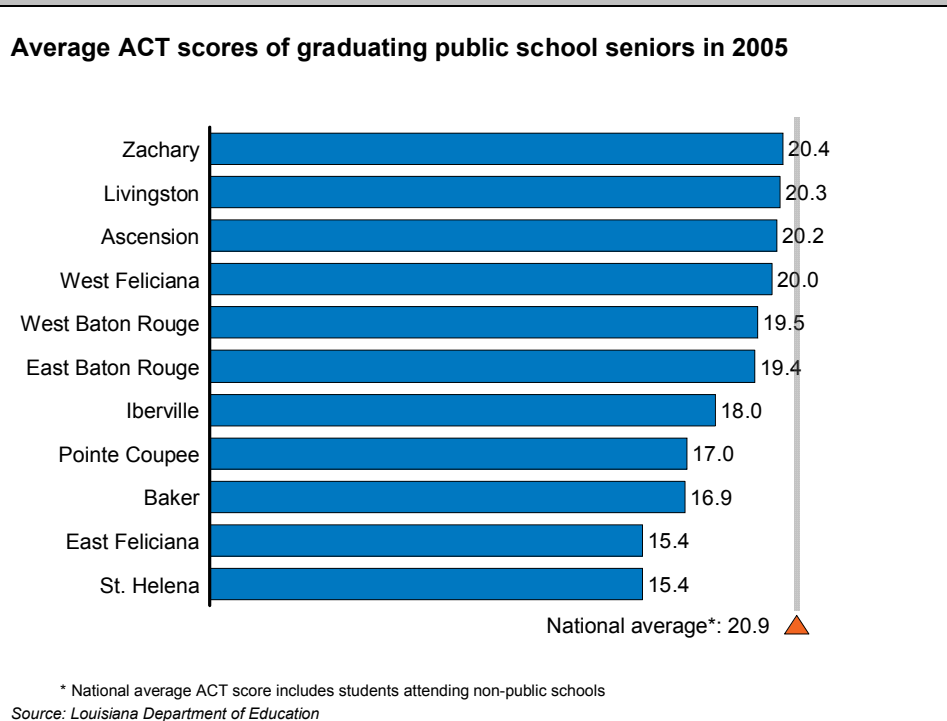
DPS is a useful tool to compare school districts across Louisiana. It tells us how students are faring on standardized tests from year to year and how this relates to other students, schools, and districts across the state. However, there are a variety of other performance indicators that the DPS does not take into account. These include ACT/SAT scores, graduation rates, or how many graduates have to take non-credit developmental courses as college freshman (see text box: “2005 ACT Scores in the Baton Rouge Area”). Furthermore, the DPS performance metric is particular to

Louisiana. Because other states do not employ this system, DPS figures do not facilitate comparison with similar areas across the country.

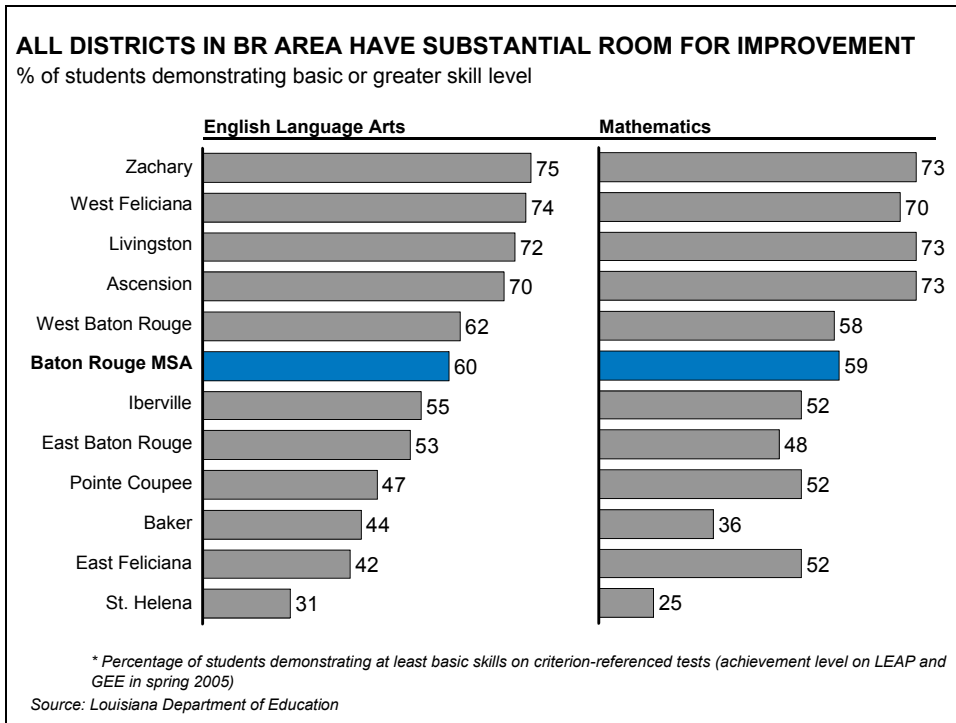
### 2005 ACT Scores in the Baton Rouge Area

Although DPS is the focus of this part of the research series—because it is the method by which the state ranks district performance—there are numerous other indicators of student, school, and district achievement. One such measurement is ACT scores, and Louisiana is among only twelve states nationwide (predominantly in the South) with more than 75 percent of students taking this college entrance exam. The highest possible score is 36.

None of the 11 districts in the Baton Rouge area met the national average score of 20.9 in 2005, although many fell just under this average. No district has seen significant increases in scores since 2001, and several actually declined.



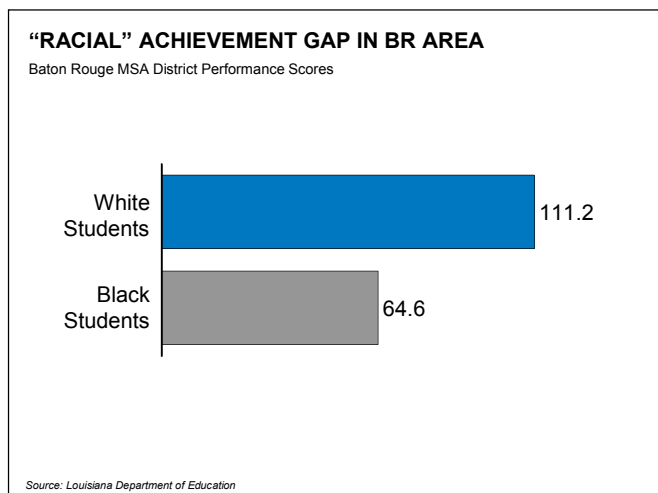
Finally, while the DPS system is useful for evaluating relative performance, it does not provide a clear measure of student learning in absolute terms. Nevertheless, the criterion-referenced tests that constitute a major portion of DPS—namely LEAP and GEE—actually measure the degree to which students are acquiring basic skills. Like DPS scores, the degree to which students acquire basic skills in key subject areas varies widely across the Baton Rouge area, ranging from 70% or more in leading districts to as little as 25% in St. Helena. In sum, the overall level of student achievement is disconcerting: only 60% of students enrolled in public schools in the Baton Rouge area demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.



### Beyond the Rankings

Student achievement in much of the Baton Rouge area frequently falls below state and national averages, eliciting frustration and criticism from parents and citizens alike. A variety of factors may contribute to low test scores, from levels of resources and support to the quality of administrators and teachers to *non-school factors* (e.g., parental involvement) outside the direct purview of the school system.

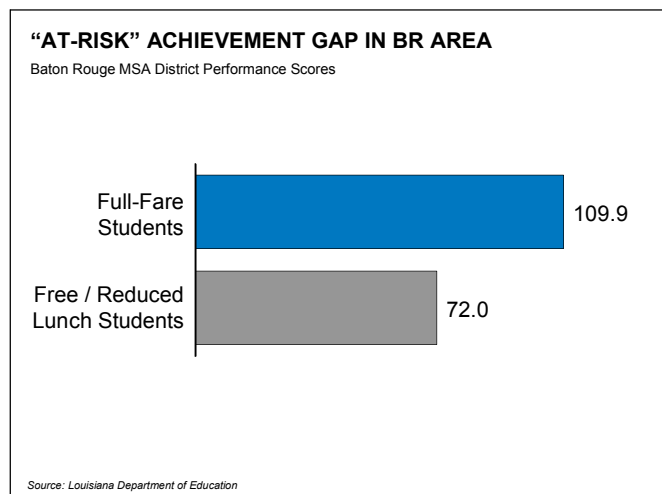
Across the country, black students historically attain lower scores on state and national tests than their white counterparts. Although minority students in the United States made significant advancements from the 1970s to the 1990s, the “racial achievement gap” continues to pose a major obstacle to realizing student progress. Recognition of the persistence of this problem led to a specific pledge by the federal government in the No Child Left Behind act, whereby “closing the achievement



gap is now a national priority.” The phenomenon is clearly present in the Baton Rouge area, where white students are performing 46.6 DPS points higher on average than black students.

Researchers and policymakers have conducted studies to determine the reasons for the achievement gap between white and black students, as well as policies and practices to narrow and eventually eliminate it. Experts note that a variety of factors contribute to unequal performance, including conditions in the home as well as systemic and structural issues within school districts. While minority students are more likely to come from low-income households with a variety of constraints, they also tend to face a lack of resources and support within the classroom. National studies have shown that teachers in high-minority schools are less prepared and qualified, and classroom sizes are consistently larger. There are fewer computers in high-minority schools and greater potential for violence.

Another non-school factor dramatically impacting student achievement is poverty. Across the country, at-risk students from low-income households typically exhibit lower test scores and achievement than students from middle- or upper-income backgrounds. The same holds true for students in Louisiana and in the Baton Rouge area.

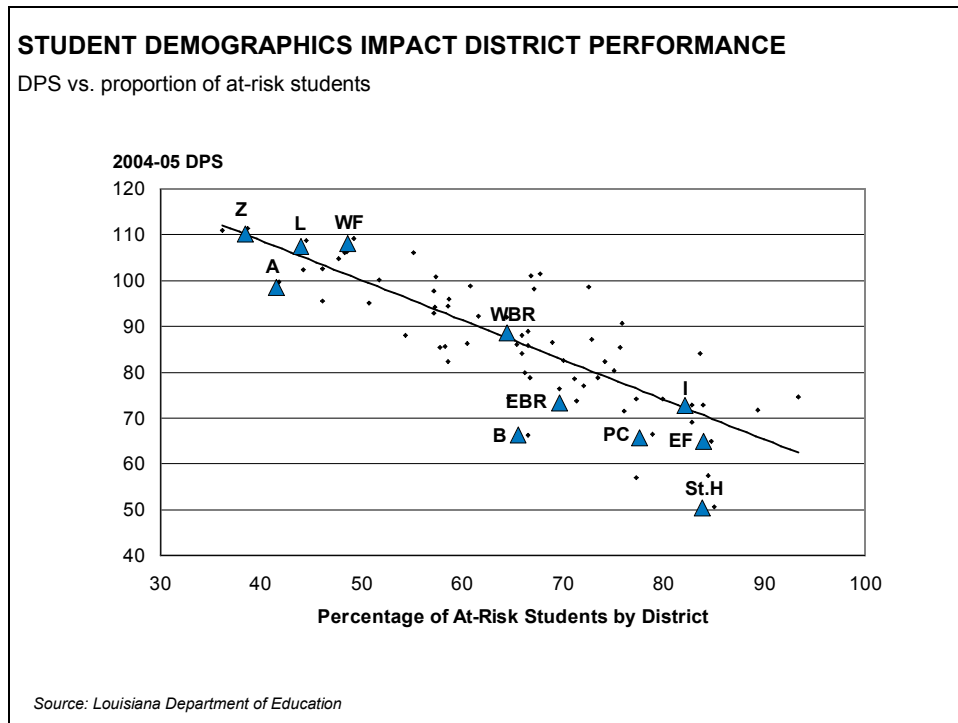


This does not imply that students from low-income households cannot learn as well as others or that society should have lower expectations for them. It does, however, recognize the advantages of students from middle- and upper-income families (e.g., parents with a college education, internet service at home, adequate school supplies). It also acknowledges the specific challenges faced by economically disadvantaged youth, such as the greater likelihood of poor nutrition, substandard housing, overburdened single parents, and/or high-crime neighborhoods.

### Taking At-Risk Population Into Account

All districts in the Baton Rouge area are responsible for the education of a substantial number of at-risk students, ranging from 42 percent in Zachary to 88 percent in St. Helena. The absolute level of poverty and the dramatic differences in at-risk student populations across Baton Rouge area school districts substantially impact district performance—so clearly observed by the fact that Zachary enjoyed the highest DPS in Louisiana, while St. Helena was last on the list.

When examining a school district's performance, it is useful to review DPS in a way that accounts for the proportion of economically disadvantaged students in a given district. In the following figure, the DPS scores of all 68 districts in Louisiana are plotted against the percentage of at-risk students in each district. The solid line highlights the trend: those areas with fewer at-risk students generally perform better than areas with a greater number of at-risk students, with some degree of variation. This trend holds true across the state, including the Baton Rouge area.



## Conclusion

In summary, *no district in the Baton Rouge area appears to be performing particularly well once the variation in at-risk student populations is taken into account.* Even though the DPS scores in certain locations—such as Ascension, Livingston, West Feliciana, and Zachary—are some of the highest in the state, these also are parishes with comparatively low percentages (<50%) of at-risk students. More importantly, even in these high ranking districts, more than 25 percent of children cannot read, write, and do math at a basic level.

Additionally, despite the fact that the largest school district—East Baton Rouge—has one of the lowest DPS scores in the state (56<sup>th</sup> of 68), this poor performance appears to be significantly influenced by the challenging socioeconomic factors of its student population. Obviously, a school district near the bottom in the state DPS rankings has significant opportunities for improvement. However, it is also important to recognize that East Baton Rouge is struggling with significant challenges in educating a very large

number of at-risk students and that similar school districts across the state and country also struggle in addressing these challenges. Similar challenges are faced by most parishes in the region.

Throughout the Baton Rouge area, there are thousands of people—parents, teachers, administrators, volunteers, and school board members—dedicated to improving student achievement and the overall quality of public schools. This is evidenced by the fact that, with one exception, every school district in the region has improved its performance over the past two years. However, with 40% of students failing to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, there is clearly much more work to be done. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are in continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge metropolitan area.



This first part of our research series provides a snapshot of school districts and student achievement in the Baton Rouge area. Although test scores across Louisiana continue to improve annually—even after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—significant challenges remain, especially in districts with the highest percentage of at-risk students. A thorough understanding of the multitude of factors that contribute to student achievement and school performance is necessary for school board members, administrators, and voters to make informed decisions this fall and beyond. The subsequent parts of this research series will continue to explore where the Baton Rouge area stands in relation to other cities and states, the determinants of school performance and student achievement, and the perceptions and realities of district performance in our area. Finally, this research series will conclude by presenting a number of potential reform initiatives for public education in the Baton Rouge area.

August 8, 2006 • Part 2 of 5

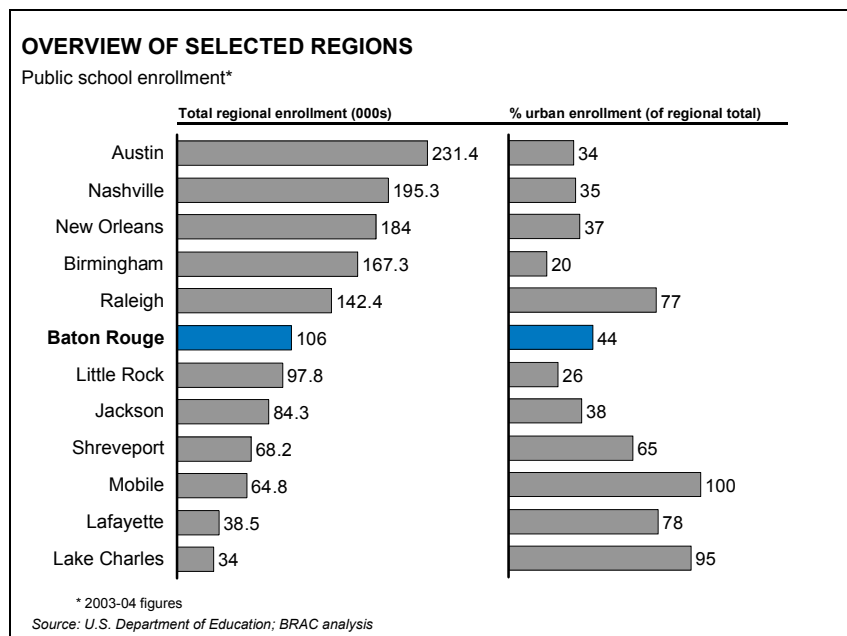


**Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area:**  
Where We Stand Relative to Our Peer Regions  
(Part 2 of a 5-part series)

On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) has initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts in the region. As individuals and companies frequently look to the quality of public education as a major factor in market evaluation, BRAC recognizes the importance of this issue to economic development. Education is intrinsically tied to workforce development and capacity, including literacy and knowledge of basic skills, and is a fundamental driver of economic prosperity.

The first part of the research series provided an overview of student achievement and district performance in the Baton Rouge area. It found that roughly 40 percent of students across the Capital Region fail to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and math; and that even in our best-performing districts, more than 25 percent of children are not learning basic skills in these critical subject areas. Additionally, it found that the level of poverty in a district generally has a significant influence on student achievement, with variation across individual districts. Building on that foundation, this second part of the research series will compare public school districts in our region with those in other metropolitan areas across Louisiana and the southern United States, paying particular attention to district performance, the differences between large urban and suburban districts, and the impact of socioeconomic factors across regions. Given that the Baton Rouge area competes with similar regions for companies and workers, the relative performance of our public school districts is a critically important factor to our regional economic competitiveness.

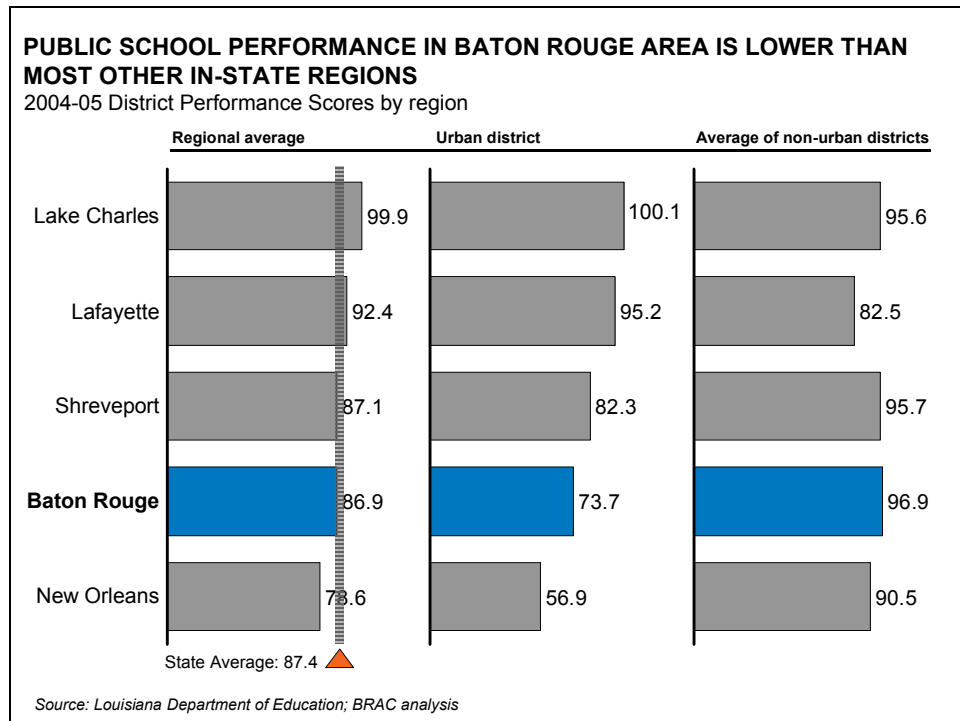
For this comparison, other regions in Louisiana and the southern U.S. were selected based on their broad similarities to the Baton Rouge area. An overview of the public school systems in these “peer” regions is shown in the following figure:



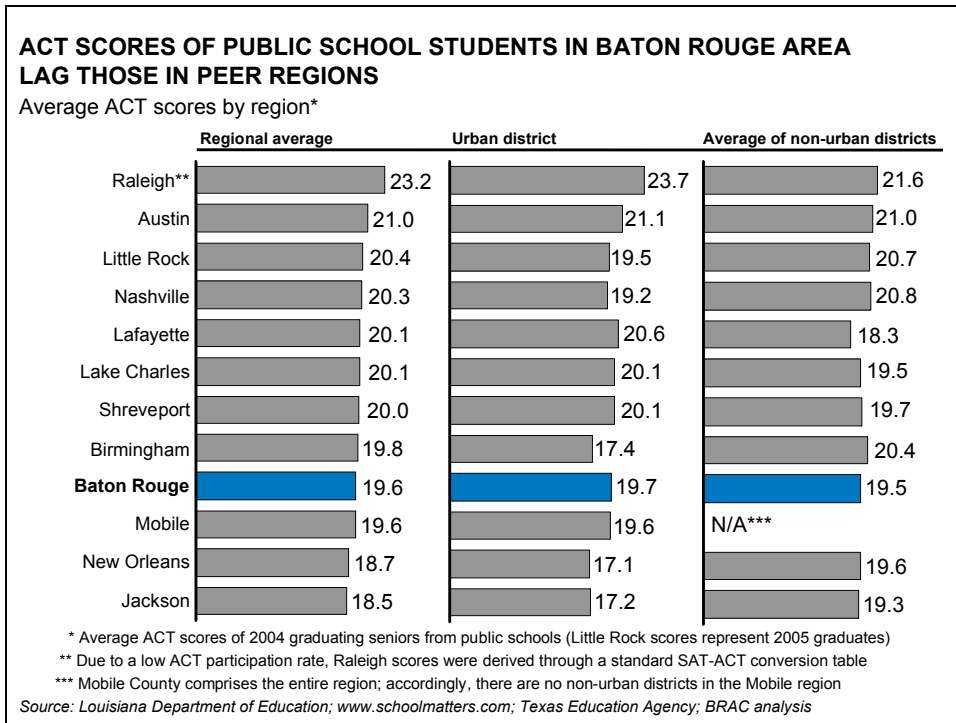
These regions are defined as metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs): land areas that have strong economic and social ties to a main city or an urbanized area with a large metropolitan population. MSAs fulfill certain requirements of metropolitan character defined by the federal government, and may include more suburban or rural parishes/counties outside of the main urbanized area. For instance, the Capital Region is drawn around the City of Baton Rouge (East Baton Rouge Parish) and includes eight outlying parishes with suburban (e.g., Livingston) and rural (e.g., St. Helena) features.

### How Public Education in the Capital Region Stacks Up

In terms of student achievement and district performance, the nine-parish Baton Rouge metropolitan area compares relatively poorly to many of our peer regions. Within Louisiana, the public school systems in the Capital Region posted a composite District Performance Score (DPS) of 86.9, lagging every metropolitan area within the state with the exception of New Orleans (78.6). While the Baton Rouge area trailed the Shreveport region by only a small margin, it fell several points behind the Lafayette region (92.4) and Lake Charles region (99.9).



Additionally, based on average ACT scores in 2004, student achievement in the Capital Region lagged that in every selected region throughout the southern U.S., with the exception of the Jackson, Mobile, and New Orleans regions.



Although the East Baton Rouge (EBR) Parish School System received a relatively low DPS score compared to major urban districts in other **Louisiana** regions, the average ACT score of EBR students is near the middle of the pack among selected regions in the South, surpassing the average score in the urban systems of Birmingham, Jackson, Little Rock, Mobile, Nashville, and New Orleans. On the other hand, EBR students on average score more than a full point lower than their counterparts in the Austin Independent School District (ISD) and several points lower than those in Wake County in the Raleigh region.

**Student Achievement and District Performance Indicators**

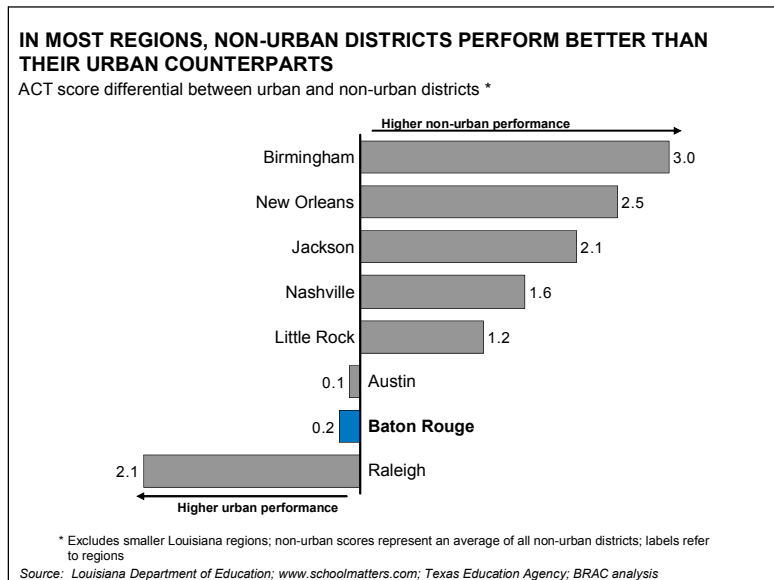
*District Performance Scores (DPS)*  
 The Louisiana Department of Education determines DPS measures by assessing student test scores, attendance, and drop-out rates. As such, the DPS program provides a broad measure of district and regional performance. However, since the program is particular to Louisiana, DPS figures do not facilitate comparison of regions in different states.

*Average ACT Scores of Graduating Seniors*  
 The ACT is a nationwide college entrance exam taken largely by high school students (predominantly in the South) and is designed to “assess high school students’ general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work.” Since not all students in a given district take the exam, there are inherent limitations in using ACT scores as district-level indicators of student achievement. Nonetheless, it is one of the best available overall indicators for comparing district/regional student achievement across states.

Furthermore, the major suburban districts in our area—Ascension and Livingston—do not meet the national average ACT score (20.9, including non-public school students)

and lag their suburban counterparts in many of the selected regions. However, unlike urban systems, several major suburban districts performed above the national average, including selected suburban districts in the Austin, Birmingham, Nashville, and Raleigh regions.

A closer look reveals the variation across the districts within each region. With a few exceptions, urban districts performed significantly lower than their respective region as a whole. For instance, the Birmingham, Jackson, and New Orleans regions are considerably hampered by a major urban district that performs significantly worse than the overall region. The class of 2004 in Birmingham City, for example, posted an average ACT score that was 3 points lower than its non-urban counterparts. Conversely, suburban districts often perform above the regional average.



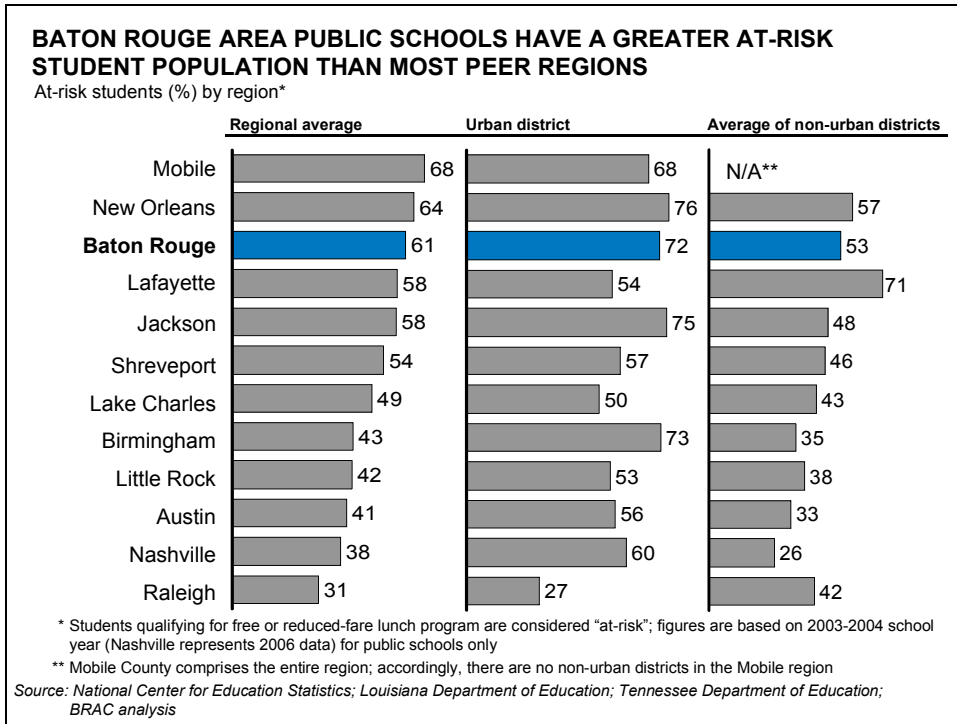
### Challenges of Public Schools in Metro Areas: Similar in Kind, Different in Degree

Public school systems in the Baton Rouge area experience common challenges that are familiar in most metropolitan areas. However, it appears that these challenges are more acute in the Capital Region than in other selected metropolitan areas.

First, the proportion of **“at-risk” students**—defined here as students receiving free or reduced-fare lunch—provides important information on the challenges facing school districts (see Part 1 for more information on at-risk students). Across the country, students from at-risk households typically exhibit lower academic achievement levels than students from middle- or upper-income backgrounds. This does not imply that students from low-income households cannot learn as well as others or that society should have lower expectations for them. It does, however, recognize the advantages of students from middle- and upper-income families (e.g., parents with a college education, internet service at home, adequate school supplies).

Compared with other selected regions, the Baton Rouge area public schools have one of the largest proportions of at-risk students (61 percent). The Raleigh area has the opposite situation, with two out of three public school students not considered at-risk.

Similarly, a clear majority of students across the Birmingham, Little Rock, Austin, and Nashville regions pay a full fare for their lunch, as well.

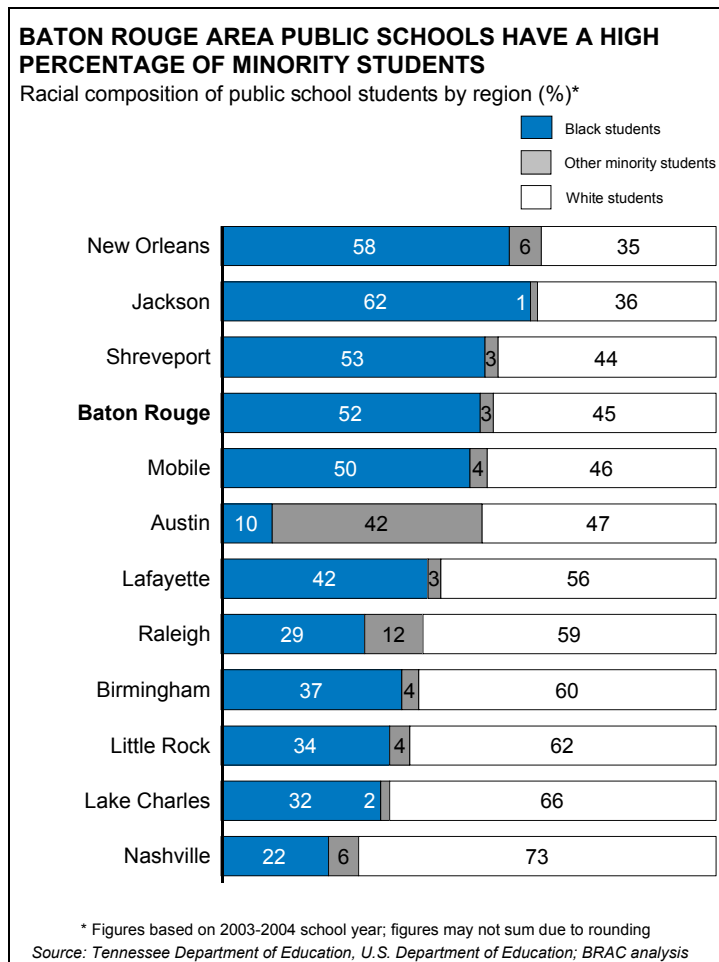


Among major urban districts within the selected regions, EBR Parish serves the fourth-highest percentage of at-risk students (72 percent), following Orleans Parish, Jackson, and Birmingham. In most regions, including the Baton Rouge area, the proportion of low-income students is especially high in urban districts. For example, in the urban districts of EBR Parish, Orleans Parish, Austin ISD, Jackson, and Nashville, the proportion of low-income students is roughly 20-35 percentage points higher than in their respective non-urban districts. There are even more dramatic differences in Birmingham, where 35 percent of students are at-risk in the non-urban districts compared to 73 percent in the region’s major urban district. The Raleigh region is a remarkable exception to this general rule, as only 27 percent of students in its major urban district are at-risk.

The Baton Rouge area’s non-urban districts also serve a greater proportion of at-risk students than the non-urban districts in most other selected regions. The average proportion of at-risk students across the non-urban districts in the Baton Rouge area is 53 percent—more than that of any other selected region except Lafayette and New Orleans. In our region’s largest suburban districts, Ascension and Livingston, at-risk students make up 43 percent of the student body. In general, percentages of at-risk students tend to be lower in non-urban districts than in urban districts, with exceptions in the Lafayette and Raleigh regions.

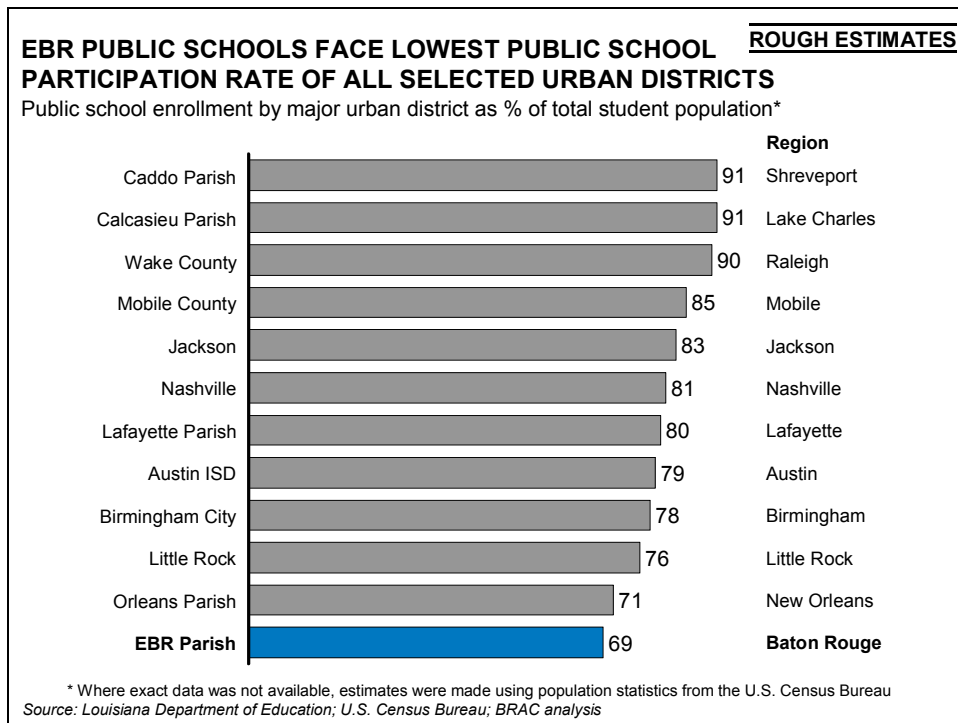
As with the proportion of at-risk students, the **racial composition** of the student body provides important information on the context of school districts (see Part 1 for more information on racial composition). Across the country, black students historically attain lower scores on state and national tests than their white counterparts. Experts note that a variety of factors contribute to unequal performance, including conditions in the home as well as systemic and structural issues within school districts. While minority students are more likely to come from low-income households with a variety of constraints, they also tend to face a lack of resources and support within the classroom. National studies have shown that teachers in high-minority schools are less prepared and qualified, and classroom sizes are consistently larger.

Across selected regions in the South, the Baton Rouge area public schools have the fourth-highest proportion of minority students (55 percent), following New Orleans (65 percent), Jackson (64 percent), and Shreveport (56 percent). In contrast, the Lake Charles and Nashville regions have the highest percentage of white students at 66 and 73 percent respectively. The Austin region is the only area with a dramatically different demographic than other selected regions, serving a student body in which four in ten students is Hispanic.



EBR Parish in particular serves a student population that in 2003-2004 was 76 percent black, significantly higher than the composite for the Capital Region as a whole (52 percent). Conversely, EBR's white enrollment (21 percent) was the fourth-lowest among the major urban districts in the selected regions. As with at-risk students, the number of minority students tends to be dramatically higher in urban school districts than in their respective metropolitan areas overall, as the Baton Rouge area illustrates. In the Birmingham and Jackson urban districts, more than 95 percent of students are black—dramatically higher than the 37 and 62 percent respectively across their regions.

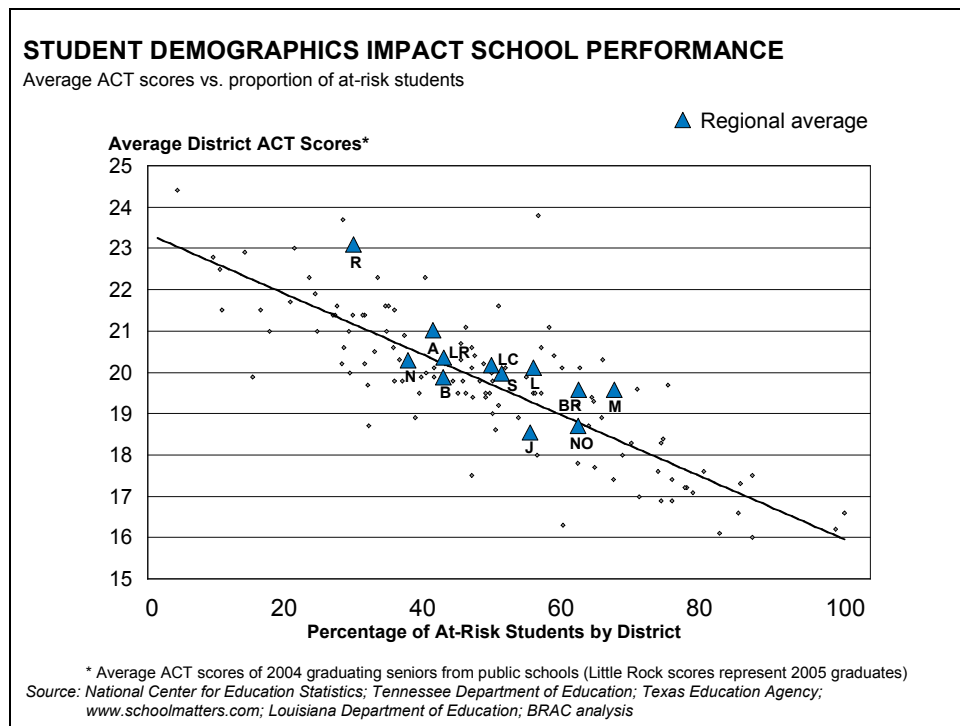
Finally, **nonpublic enrollment figures** can shed light on the challenges facing public schools, showing the level of participation and community involvement in the public school system as well as the movement of students to education alternatives, such as private schools or other public school districts, often in the suburbs. As such, the effects of this trend within a given region can be measured in simple terms with the public school participation rate in its major urban district.



EBR Parish has the lowest percentage of public school enrollment of any major urban district in the selected regions, with nearly one in three students outside the public school system. As in the Baton Rouge area, urban districts generally experience lower participation rates than their regions overall. Indeed, Caddo, Calcasieu, and Wake County are the only urban districts in the selected regions to meet or exceed the national average for public school participation.

## Taking At-Risk Population Into Account

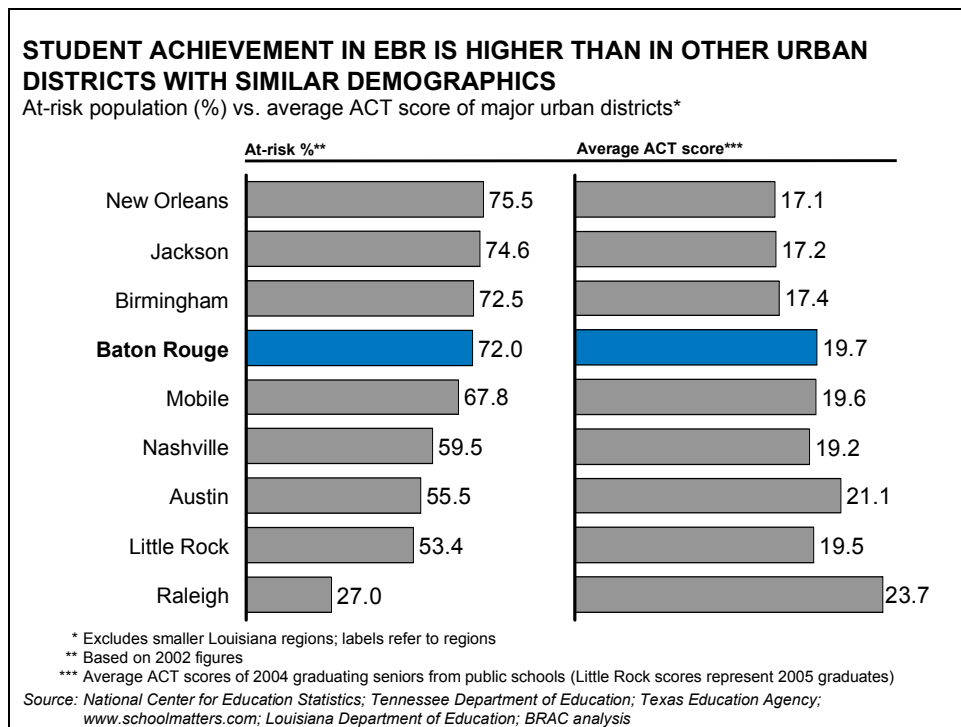
As seen in the first part of this series, it is important to view student achievement in a way that accounts for the proportion of economically disadvantaged students in a given district. In the following figure, the average ACT scores of all 118 districts in the selected regions are plotted against the percentage of at-risk students in each district. The solid line highlights the trend: those areas with fewer at-risk students generally perform better than areas with a greater number of at-risk students, with some degree of variation. This trend holds true in regions across the South, including the Baton Rouge area.



In summary, although district performance and student achievement in the Baton Rouge area may be somewhat lower than most other selected regions, this fact alone does not provide a complete picture of our situation. In fact, with the notable exception of the Raleigh area, all of the selected regions, including the Baton Rouge area, appear to be performing roughly in line with the general trend based on variation in at-risk student populations. For instance, while the Austin region posts an average ACT score that is more than a full point higher than that in the Baton Rouge area, it is also dealing with a comparatively low percentage of at-risk students (41 percent vs. 61 percent).

Similarly, student achievement in our region's non-urban districts generally falls in line with the overall trend. For instance, both Ascension and Livingston, while scoring below most of their counterparts in other selected regions, serve a larger share of at-risk students than major suburban districts in Austin, Birmingham, Nashville, and Raleigh.

In our region’s major urban district, EBR Parish, the average ACT score (19.7) is significantly higher than might be expected given that three out of four students are considered at-risk. Few other districts in this study exhibit a similar level of achievement on the ACT amidst comparable obstacles. For example, the average ACT score in Birmingham, Jackson, and Orleans—with comparably high numbers of at-risk students—is less than 17.5. Furthermore, students in Little Rock and Nashville obtain an average ACT score similar to that of EBR, but these districts have much lower proportions of at-risk students.



Despite the finding that student achievement in the overall Baton Rouge area is generally in line with that of other regions facing similar challenges, the results of our public school systems are often viewed in less forgiving terms, particularly within the field of economic development. Our weak standing relative to other regions negatively impacts the decisions of companies and individuals on whether to relocate to our area, start or expand businesses, and employ local workers. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are in continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge area.



Building on the findings in this part of our research series, Part 3 will consider various factors that influence student achievement, such as funding levels, student-teacher ratios, and the presence and retention of qualified teachers and principals. Additionally, it will include information on “non-school factors” that impact student success, such as

student mobility and parental involvement. A thorough understanding of the multitude of factors that contribute to student achievement and school performance is necessary for school board members, administrators, and voters to make informed decisions this fall and beyond. The subsequent parts of this research series will also examine the perceptions and realities of district performance in our area. Finally, this research series will conclude by presenting a number of potential reform initiatives for public education in the Baton Rouge area.

August 30, 2006 • Part 3 of 5



**Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area:**  
Factors that Impact Student Achievement  
(Part 3 of a 5-part series)

On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts in the region. As individuals and companies frequently look to the quality of public education as a major factor in market evaluation, BRAC recognizes the importance of this issue to economic development. Education is intrinsically tied to workforce development and capacity, including literacy and knowledge of basic skills, and is a fundamental driver of economic prosperity.

The first part of the research series provided an overview of student achievement and district performance in the Baton Rouge area. Part 2 compared public school districts in our region with those in other metropolitan areas across Louisiana and the southern United States, paying particular attention to district performance, the differences between large urban and suburban districts, and socioeconomic factors that impact student achievement. The initial findings show that the level of poverty in a district/region generally has a very significant influence on student achievement, with variation across individual areas.

Building on the discussion of student achievement across districts and regions, this installment of the research series explores key factors that impact student achievement in the Baton Rouge area. Education policy experts have identified numerous “in-school” and “non-school” factors that have important influences on learning. This report compares these factors in the Capital Region’s public school districts to those in peer regions across Louisiana and the southern United States (see Part 2 for more information on selected regions). In-school factors covered in this report include characteristics of faculty and administrators, district funding and resources, and classroom quality and activities. Non-school factors include student life outside of school, parental involvement in education, and family and household characteristics.

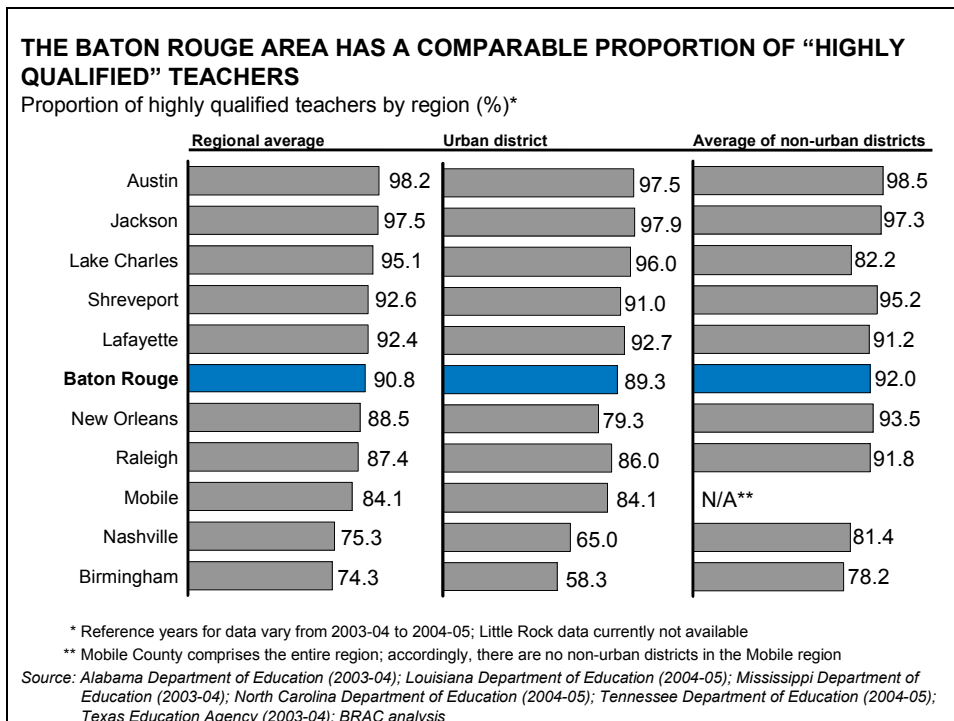
Given that young people typically spend only 13 percent of their waking hours in school from birth through age 18, it is necessary to consider the influence of non-school factors in order to fully understand the determinants of student achievement. While schools have only a limited ability to control these factors, a comprehensive approach to improve student achievement—including engagement across the community at large—could offer greater leverage over these influences. Nevertheless, there also are clearly many factors that schools control more directly.

### **In-School Factors**

BRAC selected seven major in-school factors to include in its comparison of Baton Rouge area school districts to districts in peer regions: teacher quality, teacher salaries, expenditures per student, principal experience, student-teacher ratio, physical facilities, and school safety. We found that, in general, our 11 public school districts compare favorably on these factors to their counterparts in peer regions both in- and out-of-state.

First, **teacher quality**—measured here using the proportion of “highly qualified” teachers in public school districts—is one of the most widely acknowledged factors impacting student achievement. The definition and standards for “highly qualified” teachers are based on the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which explicitly recognizes the importance of teacher quality to overall student achievement. To attain “highly qualified” status, teachers must have a bachelor’s degree, full state certification, and “demonstrated competence in subject area knowledge and teaching.” In addition to these elements, motivation is a critically important aspect of teacher quality but more difficult to measure objectively. Experts increasingly state that the influence of teachers is the single-most important in-school factor in determining student achievement, with cumulative, lasting effects on students as they advance. Notably, the presence of effective teachers for consecutive years is proven to help close the achievement gap between minority and at-risk students and their peers.

In Louisiana, new standards for teacher quality were instituted in 1998 as a component of the broad revisions to the accountability system for K-12 education across the state. With the implementation of rigorous standards for certification, new policies for professional development, major recruitment and retention programs, and other efforts, Louisiana has made significant progress. In the 2004-05 academic year, 91.4 percent of classes in Louisiana were taught by “highly qualified” teachers. In 2006, the state received national attention and recognition of its newly instated high standards, ranking number one in the country for efforts to improve teacher quality by *Education Week*.

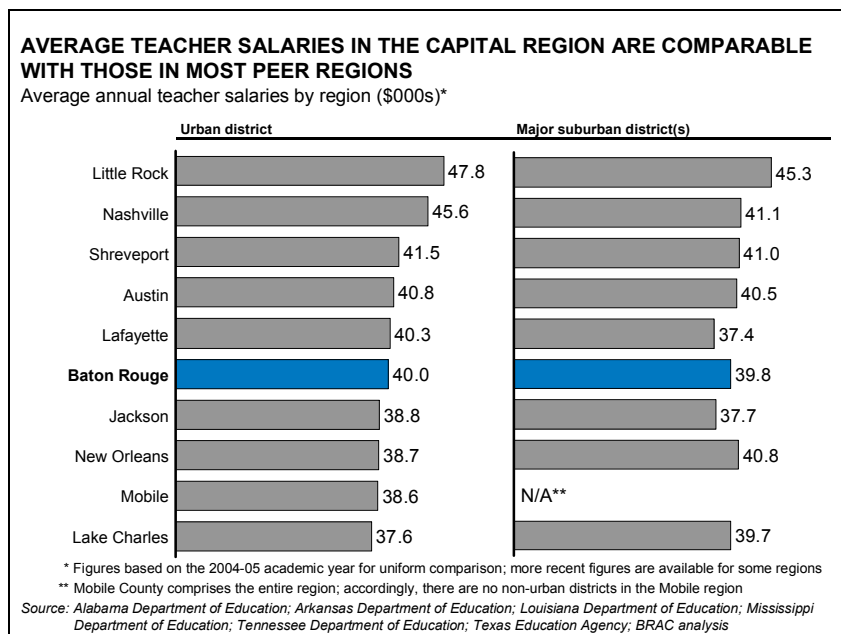


*The Baton Rouge area has a proportion of “highly qualified” teachers that is comparable to that of our peer regions in general. In fact, more core courses are taught by “highly*

qualified” teachers in Baton Rouge area schools than classes in Raleigh, Mobile, Nashville, or Birmingham. Our relatively high standing on this measure is largely driven by Louisiana’s award-winning education accountability program, with many regions in Louisiana posting large percentages of “highly qualified” teachers. In this context, even though the Baton Rouge area compares favorably to many out-of-state regions, it is second to last when compared to peer regions within the state. Similarly, East Baton Rouge (EBR) ranks relatively high compared to its counterparts in out-of-state regions but lags the major urban districts of most regions in Louisiana.

On the other hand, major suburban districts in the Baton Rouge area—including Ascension (96.6 percent) and Livingston (97.4 percent)—provide a greater percentage of “highly qualified” teachers than nearly any other urban or major suburban district in the selected regions. Not all non-urban districts in the Capital Region rank so high, however; only half of teachers in St. Helena are “highly qualified,” and just three out of four educators in East Feliciana and Pointe Coupee have met these standards. In every district, however, it is important to recognize that significant disparity may exist in teacher quality from school to school, as these figures represent district averages only.

Like teacher quality, **teacher compensation** is commonly associated with student achievement since compensation levels strongly impact the ability of districts to recruit and retain effective teachers. *In urban and major suburban districts in the Baton Rouge area, average teacher salaries are comparable to those in most peer regions*, including Austin, Lafayette, and Jackson. A few districts, however, are paying teachers at significantly higher levels on average than Baton Rouge area systems—over \$7,000 per year more in the case of Little Rock. Additionally, the Baton Rouge area is one of the few regions where the major urban district (EBR) does not pay a higher average salary than all the major suburban districts (e.g., Ascension).



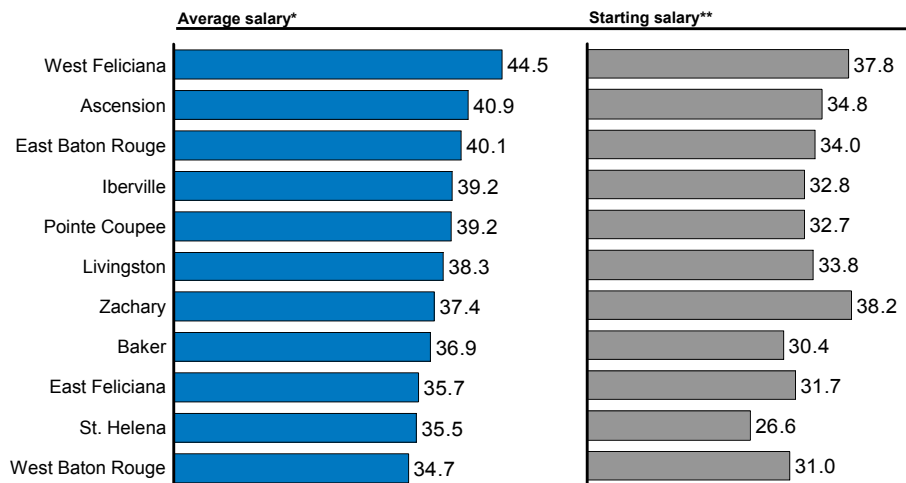
In addition to average salaries, “starting” salaries for entry-level teachers represent an important factor in recruiting and retaining effective teachers at the beginning of their careers. By this measure, teacher compensation in the Baton Rouge area appears relatively strong. The starting salary for a first-year teacher with a bachelor’s degree in EBR this year is \$34,025, better than that of all but two of its urban counterparts in the selected regions. Furthermore, starting salaries in the major suburban districts in the Baton Rouge area are also relatively strong.

### Teacher Salaries in the Capital Region’s 11 Public School Districts

While teacher salaries in the Baton Rouge area are generally competitive with those in other selected regions, there is wide variation in salary levels among individual public school districts within the Capital Region. These disparities have a strong impact on our districts’ relative competitiveness in attracting qualified teachers. In particular, based on figures from the 2004-05 academic year, the urban district in the Capital Region—EBR—pays smaller salaries on average than some of its suburban counterparts (i.e., Ascension, West Feliciana). This difference is especially significant considering that the work of teachers in urban districts is typically considered “tougher” due to higher rates of poverty and lower public-school participation rates in the community at large. Some rural districts in the region face similar disadvantages in teacher recruitment due to relatively low salary levels, including East Feliciana and St. Helena. Given that teacher quality represents one of the most powerful factors impacting the achievement of disadvantaged students, competitive advantage in teacher recruitment has a substantial structural influence on student achievement.

#### LARGE DISPARITIES IN TEACHER SALARY EXIST ACROSS THE BR REGION

Average and starting annual teacher salaries by district (\$000s)



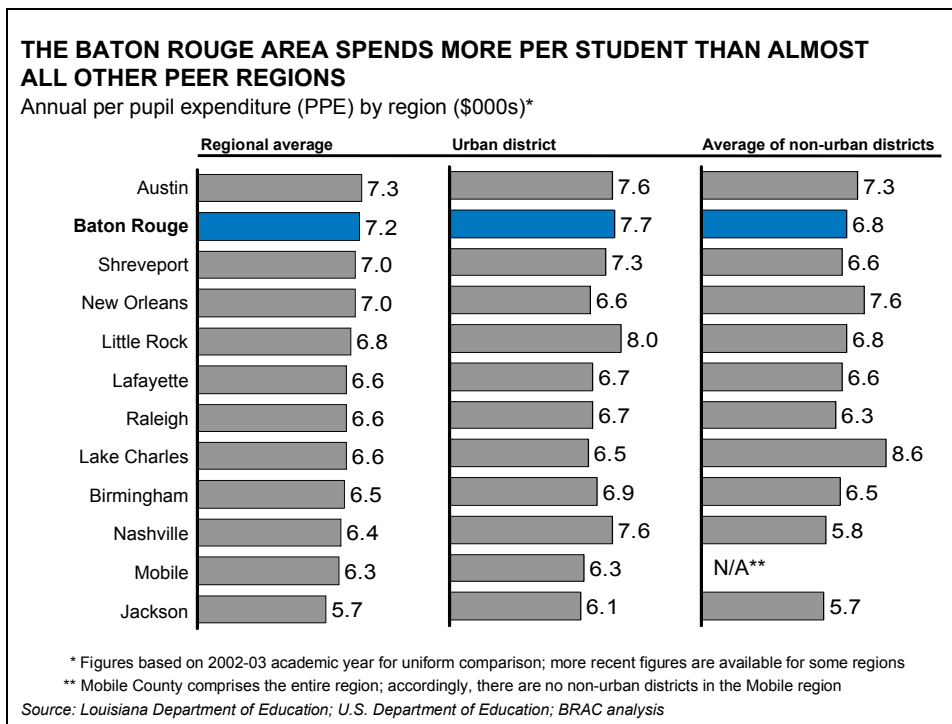
\* Average salary figures based on the 2004-05 academic year. In the case of Zachary, recent substantial improvements in starting salaries are not represented in the 2004-05 average salary figure

\*\* Starting salary figures are based on first-year teachers with a bachelor’s degree in the 2006-07 academic year as of August 1, 2006 (for districts where recent salary information was not available, the 2005-06 salary schedule was used and augmented with the state pay raise of \$1,500)

Source: Louisiana Department of Education; salary schedules and phone survey of individual districts; BRAC analysis

Like teacher salaries, the **level of expenditures** per student (excluding capital expenditures and debt service)—commonly called “per pupil expenditures” (PPE)—is another commonly cited in-school factor. Although the impact of funding levels remains

a subject of debate among experts, some research has demonstrated a correlation between PPE (i.e., money) and student achievement. In fact, some experts suggest that increasing funds for public education may have a particularly strong impact on performance when associated with targeted resource allocation that addresses specific needs. Such funds and reforms for minority and at-risk students, in particular, tend to elevate student achievement across the board. Accordingly, those districts with the greatest proportion of at-risk students—like many in the Baton Rouge area—may stand to benefit the most from increased funding levels coupled with effective resource allocation.



The average PPE across the Baton Rouge area is greater than that of any of the selected peer regions except Austin. This relatively high regional average largely is driven by the \$7,660 annual PPE in EBR, the second highest among the urban school districts surveyed. On average, non-urban districts in the Baton Rouge area fall in line with their counterparts in peer regions, although PPE ranges in these districts from \$5,654 (Livingston) to \$9,216 (West Feliciana). While spending in the Baton Rouge area compares favorably to peer regions, it is also important to note that schools serving a relatively large proportion of at-risk students—like many of those in the Capital region—may require additional spending to address the challenges associated with their student demographic (see Parts 1 and 2 for more information on the impact of poverty on student achievement).

Some experts believe that increased PPE for instruction is one means to target resources directly to students and classroom needs. Although analyses in our state have shown only a weak relationship between instructional expenditures and

performance, it is still useful to understand how districts in our area compare on this indicator. In this regard, districts in the Baton Rouge area generally fall below peer regions in the percentage of resources devoted to “instructional expenditures,” such as teacher salaries and textbooks. EBR, for example, spent 55 percent of its resources on instruction in 2002-03 compared with 58 percent in Austin ISD and 62 percent in Nashville. EBR’s low ranking in this area may result from spending a relatively large share of resources (27 percent) on non-administrative support operations (e.g., maintenance, transportation, food services) compared to other major urban districts such as Jackson (23 percent), Austin and Nashville (18 percent), and Wake County (16 percent). In some cases, however, suburban districts in the Capital Region fare better. Ascension and Livingston both spent 64 percent on instruction—equal or higher to most of their counterparts in peer regions.

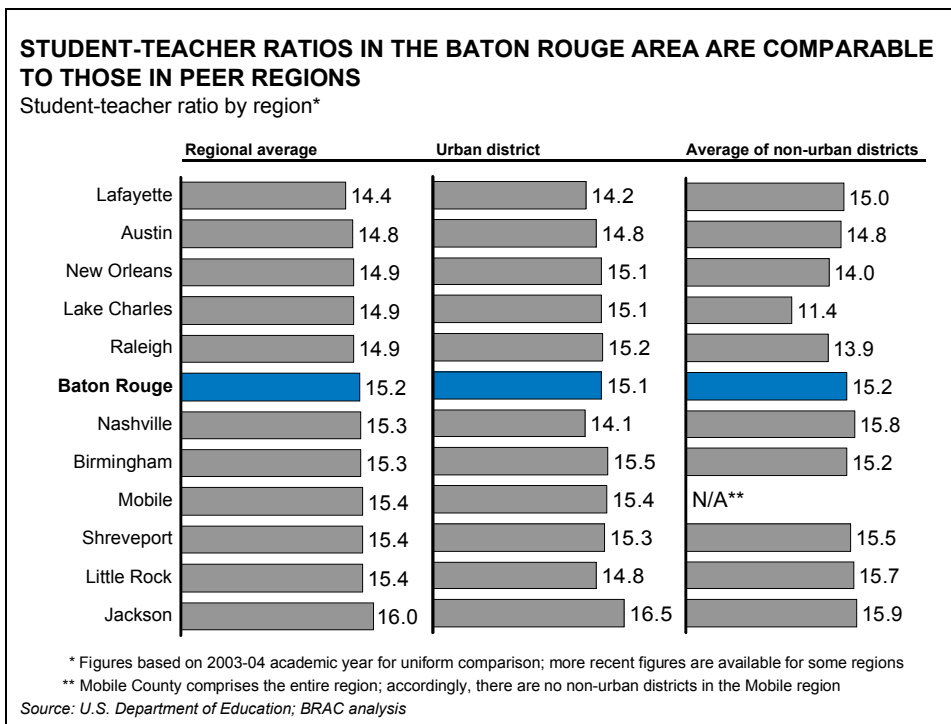
Research indicates that the **characteristics and experience of principals** also impact student achievement. Experts have identified key responsibilities of school administrators that can positively affect school performance, such as the hiring of and support for qualified teachers, creation of standard procedures at the school level, engagement with teachers to design and implement policies, and regular monitoring of school programs and practices to understand their effectiveness. In recognition of the importance of school leadership, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reinforced the notion that principals—like teachers—require training in order to be effective in their leadership role and to advance performance at the school level. Louisiana also has instituted higher standards for principals, including a mandate that new school administrators must participate in an induction program that links “leadership proficiency and skill to productive schools and enhanced student achievement.”

*Within the state of Louisiana, EBR has some of the most experienced school administrators.* Over 86 percent of principals in EBR have at least 20 years experience. This figure decreases to 79 percent across the Baton Rouge area as a whole, as only 72 percent of principals in Livingston, for example, have comparable experience. This factor alone is not a predictor of leadership quality and motivation, for which there are few quantifiable measurements. Viewed in another way, however, a high number of very experienced principals may represent an important opportunity for school districts: as administrators begin to retire and new leaders emerge, there is room for fresh ideas and approaches, which should be cultivated and encouraged.

Another factor with a frequently cited impact on student achievement is **class size and student-teacher ratio**. While the student-teacher ratio represents a general description of the level of attention for each student for comparative purposes, it is not a measurement of the number of students in each classroom. For example, in public schools across the country in 2000, the student-teacher ratio was 15.6, but the average class size was 20.9 since not all teachers are staffed in traditional classroom environments. Despite the fact that the research linking class size and student achievement remains a subject of debate among experts, reducing class size has become a cornerstone of national and state policy. Nearly half of all states have

enacted legislation and policies to reduce class size to 20 students or less. As of 2005, over half of all classes in Louisiana had less than 20 students.

Smaller classes and increased interaction between teachers and students *in the early grades* can particularly benefit some targeted groups, with the greatest positive impacts seen in minority students during their first year of formal schooling. When class sizes in elementary schools are small (i.e., 13 to 17 students per class) for consecutive years, for example, student achievement can be enhanced throughout the student’s academic career—even when returning to full-size classes—especially among those students most in need of support. A lower student-teacher ratio also contributes to fewer behavior problems, allowing teachers to focus more on instruction and less on classroom management. This fact was shown to enhance student achievement in a study conducted in Louisiana, where teachers in small classes were more likely to use facial expression and eye contact, make more positive remarks than negative ones, conduct small group activities, and engage in productive, nurturing interactions that may partially explain higher achievement in small classes.



In general, *districts in the Baton Rouge area have a comparable student-teacher ratio to their peers in other selected regions.* Overall, the Baton Rouge area has a student-teacher ratio of 15.2. Among selected regions, the Lafayette area has the lowest student-teacher ratio (14.4), while the Jackson region has the highest (16.0). Although the Baton Rouge area falls short of the Louisiana average of 14.8 students per teacher, it fares better than five of the seven out-of-state peer regions, as well as the national average (15.9). Additionally, only four other urban districts have a smaller ratio than EBR. In our region’s non-urban districts, West Feliciana (12.2) and Iberville (13.2)

exhibit very low ratios compared to their counterparts in peer regions, but Livingston (16.1) and Zachary (18.7) do not compare as favorably.

Another aspect of school climate—and a frequently cited determinant of student achievement—is the state of **physical facilities**. Research shows that higher achievement is associated with newer buildings and overall facility conditions, as is improved health and attendance. In particular, studies show a 5 to 17 percentile point difference between achievement of students in poor buildings and those students in “standard” buildings, even when the socioeconomic status of students is controlled. Quality of facilities has also been linked with improved student behavior, fewer discipline problems, and more positive attitudes and relationships among teachers and students in general. In fact, research has linked the quality of facilities to the ability to retain teachers; in one study, this factor was even more important than teacher compensation to their decision to remain in a given school or district.

Of the seven in-school factors reviewed in our research, the quality of physical facilities was the only one where the Baton Rouge area apparently trails its peer regions by a substantial degree. Low investment in facilities appears to be a statewide trend. In fact, the Baton Rouge area fares relatively well when compared to the Louisiana average. For facility maintenance and repair, Louisiana schools spent approximately \$133 per student per year, while districts in the Baton Rouge area spent an average of nearly \$350. The average in our area is bolstered by high expenditures for facility repairs and maintenance in EBR (\$578 per student), compared to only \$160 in Livingston and \$93 in Ascension. Nevertheless, the average age of facilities in EBR is greater than 40 years, and many lack adequate electrical systems, roofing, HVAC systems, and learning equipment/materials. Even after the most critical facility needs are addressed by ongoing capital improvement programs, approximately \$600 million in additional identified needs in EBR must be addressed for facilities to meet official specifications.

The cost of maintenance, repair, and construction for schools throughout the country is rising annually due to higher enrollment, increased technology demands, and aging facilities. Construction and repair is primarily a local responsibility, which can lead to wide variations in funding and costs across school districts. Experts note that districts with low property wealth, numerous competing needs, and debt limitations face particular constraints in raising the necessary resources for improving school facilities.

Even more important than the quality of facilities may be the general climate within schools—namely, **school safety**. In the 1970s and 1980s, as violence and drug use increased on campuses nationwide, school districts adopted zero-tolerance policies, enlisted the assistance of law enforcement, and instituted various conflict resolution, drug awareness, bullying prevention, and mentoring programs to encourage a learning environment that is first safe, then productive. Arguably, this action—and continued focus and funding encouraged by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—has made some impact on decreasing violence and crime on campus, as national crime rates against students at school declined by 53 percent for theft and 42 percent for violent

crimes between 1992 and 2003. Yet crime and violence have not disappeared, particularly in high-poverty urban districts, as school conditions tend to reflect their surrounding communities. The factors that contribute to violence in schools mirror those in the greater community: racism, drug abuse, access to weapons, child abuse and neglect, inadequate parenting, unemployment, and exposure to violence in the media, among others.

Although difficult to quantify, the perceptions of students regarding their safety can be an important indicator of this factor. *Students in the Baton Rouge area perceive the risk factors for school safety, such as drugs and guns, in similar ways to students across the state.* In Louisiana, approximately one in four sixth graders perceives drugs and handguns as available, which is related to both a higher risk of crime as well as alcohol or drug abuse among adolescents. Across the state, surveys suggest that less than one percent of high school seniors actually carried a handgun to school, six percent have been arrested, 12 percent have attacked someone with the intent to harm, and 15 percent have been drunk or high at school.

Interestingly, student surveys conducted in urban or suburban districts across the Baton Rouge area indicate similar levels of school safety. Contrary to popular belief, slightly more sixth graders in Ascension and Livingston perceive handguns as available than students in EBR, and more seniors in Ascension say they have been arrested and have been drunk or high at school than students in EBR or Livingston.

In sum, public school districts in the Baton Rouge area compare fairly well to their counterparts in other regions based on the in-school factors considered here. Nevertheless, student achievement in the Capital Region generally lags that of peer regions (see Part 2 for more information on our relative standing). This apparent contradiction can be attributed, in part, to the need to continually examine the evolving needs of students and adjust teaching and administrative efforts appropriately. Furthermore, there is no "silver bullet" among the in-school factors. It is important to note, however, that there are a number of other important in-school factors that influence student achievement, including curriculum design, teaching methods, technology and materials, school size, and other issues.

There is another set of factors that are largely beyond the direct control of teachers and schools. As discussed in the initial parts of this research series, public schools in the Baton Rouge area face greater challenges than their peers in most other selected regions. In particular, the high proportion of at-risk students in the Baton Rouge area, especially in school districts which face the greatest levels of poverty, poses substantial challenges to learning that many other regions simply do not experience as acutely.

### **The Impact of Non-School Factors on Student Achievement**

There are numerous factors *outside* of the classroom and away from school grounds that also impact student achievement. Given that children typically spend only 13

percent of their waking life at school through age 18, it is not surprising that experts have concluded that non-school factors can be as important to student achievement as the in-school factors presented above. The choices, activities, and lifestyles of individual students, parental involvement and expectations, and family and household characteristics influence the academic achievement of young people as well as their future education and employment. While it is difficult to compare regions in terms of non-school factors for lack of sufficient data, it is clear that these factors have a substantial impact on student achievement in the Baton Rouge area.

In the earliest years of a child's life, differences in parenting and the home environment often create and/or exacerbate the gap between children of middle-income families and those of low-income families. The effect of nurture, discipline, teaching, language, and resources is cumulative and increases in impact through each year of school as students fall further behind. However, early, effective interventions can decrease the gap.

**Parental involvement** in education is perhaps the most recognized non-school factor impacting student achievement. Research indicates a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. In addition to higher test scores, parental involvement and expectations lead to a higher pass rate, increased attendance, and improved behavior at schools and in the home. *In the Baton Rouge area, students in more affluent suburban districts are more likely to feel connected to and supported by their families than their peers in EBR.* For example, only 47 percent of sixth graders in EBR report a high level of family attachment—“that they are a valued part of their family”—compared to 55 percent in Ascension and 59 percent in West Feliciana. As these differences suggest, family wealth and income levels have a positive influence on parental involvement in general.

The participation of parents in parent-teacher conferences, discussions with school officials, attendance at school events, and other means of engagement in their children's school activities has modest positive effects on student achievement. More active forms of involvement, such as volunteering or class visits, yield the greatest results. Many experts argue that the stronger variable is parental participation in education at home through high expectations and encouragement for academic success, involvement with homework, and daily reading and learning activities.

Experts have also found that **time-use habits** and the quality of individual students' **out-of-school activities**—combined with high parental and teacher expectations—have a powerful effect on student achievement, even more than parental education levels and socioeconomic background combined. In particular, “high-yield” out-of-school activities, including reading and participation in intellectually stimulating games and hobbies, can reinforce formal classroom learning and support student achievement. In general, students in high-poverty schools have less access to extracurricular school activities and are less likely to participate, as well. For example, 74 percent of Zachary

seniors—with the lowest percentage of at-risk young people of any district in the Capital Region—report “opportunities for pro-social involvement” at school. Students reported fewer opportunities in districts with higher levels of poverty: 61.3 percent in EBR (75 percent at-risk), 45.7 percent in Iberville (84 percent at-risk), and only 42.1 percent in Baker (70 percent at-risk). Contrary to the national trend among urban districts, only 35 percent of seniors in EBR reported a “low commitment to school,” while these numbers were actually above the state average in Ascension (48 percent) and Livingston (43 percent).

Another important non-school factor is **stability**, often measured in terms of student mobility (i.e., how often students change schools for non-promotional reasons). Experts have concluded that student mobility correlates with poor student achievement, disciplinary problems, a greater likelihood of victimization at school, and diminished prospects for graduation. High turnover rates cause a “chaos” factor according to educators, negatively impacting the school climate, classroom environment, teacher morale, and even the achievement of non-mobile students, while creating an administrative and financial burden for the school in general. Nationally, urban students are far more likely than their peers to change schools on a regular basis, even after accounting for socioeconomic background. For example, 46 percent of urban eighth-grade students changed schools two or more times since the first grade, as opposed to 34 percent of suburban and 28 percent of rural students. The degree of change is also expressed as a “mobility rate”: the cumulative number of students who enter or exit schools during an academic year as a percent of the number in school at the beginning of the year.

During the 2004-05 academic year, the mobility rate across the entire EBR school district was 42 percent, with the rate for many individual schools in the range of 50 to 75 percent. During the same academic year, Ascension, with a much lower proportion of children from low-income families, experienced a mobility rate of less than 25 percent.

Additionally, the **educational attainment of parents** can impact student achievement. Parents with relatively strong educational backgrounds also generally provide their children with greater guidance on homework and other school-related activities. Furthermore, when one or more parents has received a college degree, they are more likely to have more funds to invest in education and are more supportive of academic success, leading to higher educational achievement among their children compared to students whose parents did not attend college. Nationally, the parents of at-risk students are the least likely to have attended four years at a university (11 percent), while 41 percent of parents in low-poverty schools had completed college.

These socioeconomic dynamics also impact children in their early years. In general, children of low-income families are exposed to a relatively limited vocabulary and are more frequently prohibited from talking. As such, children of low-income families on average begin school with much smaller vocabularies and weaker non-cognitive skills (e.g., socialization) than their middle-income peers. Studies indicate that these factors

impact subsequent verbal ability, receptive and spoken language, and academic achievement in kindergarten through grade 3.

**Parental participation in the workforce** also affects student achievement. Parental employment in stable, two-parent, economically secure families tends to lead to higher achievement. In single-parent homes, the absence of the parent due to working hours may negatively affect their child's performance. The field of employment also corresponds with student achievement. For instance, the students of parents with "high occupational status" scored higher in mathematics than those with "middle" or "low" occupational status. Research has also shown that working class parents are more likely to view education as the "schools' job."

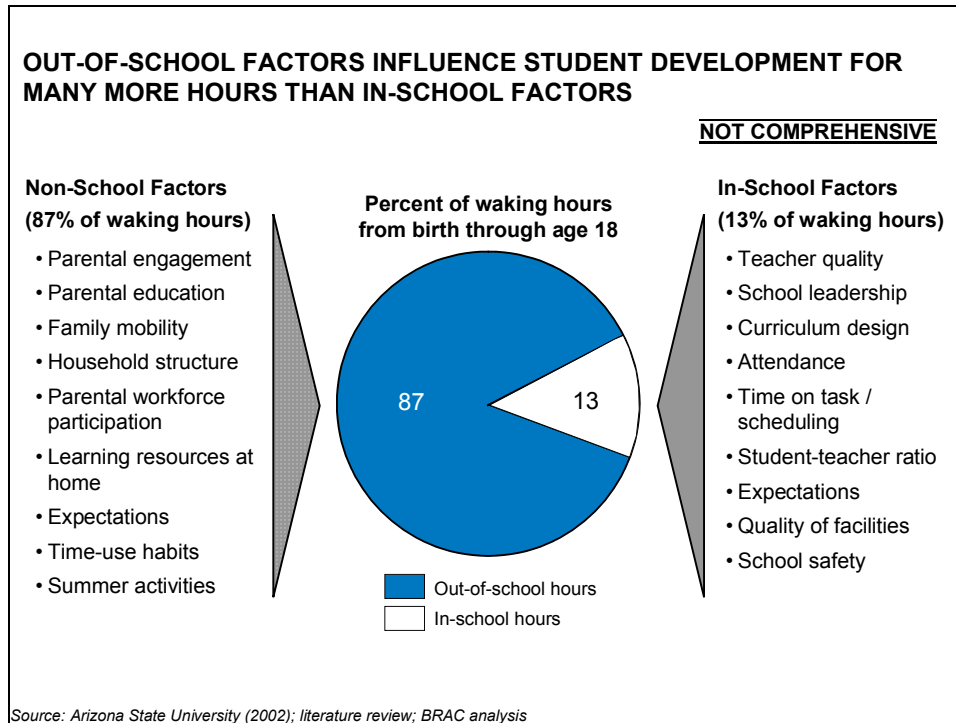
In addition, **family structure** impacts student achievement. In general, single parents have less free time to spend with their children than those in two-parent households, which correlates to lower student achievement. This disparity is most prominent in high-poverty areas, as greater numbers of at-risk and urban students live with only one parent. Across the nation, 68 percent of urban students live with both parents, while 81 percent and 80 percent of suburban and rural students, respectively, are from two-parent households. However, when single mothers and fathers are involved in their children's schools—just less than half of all single parents are described as "highly involved"—these students are more likely to score higher on tests and less likely to repeat a grade or be subjected to disciplinary action.

In sum, various non-school factors have a profound influence on student achievement. *Unfortunately, while comparative data on non-school factors generally is unavailable, our region's relatively high poverty levels (see Parts 1 and 2 of this series) suggest that we compare poorly to our peer regions on most non-school factors.* Among them, parental involvement in the home and the educational attainment of parents may play the most important role in determining a child's level of success and academic future. The socioeconomic background of students and parents can compound these factors and place at-risk children at a disadvantage on many levels. In addition to the challenges discussed in this section, the lives of many at-risk students are affected by general instability and conflict in the home and neighborhood, greater likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse among family members, higher levels of stress, and poor nutrition, health, and sleeping patterns. Yet when their parents are invested and involved in their education, these students can exhibit performance at levels comparable to students from other backgrounds.

### **Improving Student Achievement – The Need for a Comprehensive Approach**

In recent years, school districts across the Baton Rouge area have made substantial strides to improve student achievement. These efforts have been successful in that, on average, school systems in the Capital Region meet or exceed their peers in addressing many in-school factors that impact student learning. Furthermore, with one exception, every public school district in the Baton Rouge area has posted improvements over the

past two years on broad measures of school performance. However, despite these successes, educational outcomes in the Baton Rouge area continue to trail most peer regions in absolute terms. This apparent paradox suggests a complex interplay of factors impacting student achievement.



Accordingly, it will take a broad-based approach for our public school systems in the Baton Rouge area to achieve nationally competitive results. Our public school systems should continue to make advances on various in-school factors and, where possible, address non-school factors that impact student achievement. Although the latter set of issues is traditionally considered outside the direct purview of our schools, it is clear that these determinants are equally if not more important to the success of students and the future of public education in the Baton Rouge area.

Research and “best practices” are available from across the country, and there are lessons that can be utilized by school districts in our area. Yet each community, as a body of citizens, must work together to prioritize the needs and reforms that best fit its unique group of students. In part, this will require an ongoing examination and discussion of the needs of our students and schools combined with a commitment to act by leaders and citizens alike. We should strive to expand our conception of education in the Capital Region to include the critically important out-of-school hours, including after-school hours and “summer vacation.” In other words, maximizing student achievement in the Baton Rouge area means that we must become a “learning community”—a place where formal and informal education are widely embraced, where workers seek and prepare for knowledge-based jobs, and where lifelong learning is a common pursuit of our culture.

Finally, continued improvement to address both in-school and non-school factors, even with a broader conception of schooling, is not enough. To address the social and economic issues that negatively impact student achievement, our community must continue to pursue job creation and economic growth, even as public school systems continue making advances, such that families in the Baton Rouge area have access to greater economic opportunity. As suggested by the complex relationship of factors impacting student achievement, our region must take a comprehensive approach to attain the quality of public schools and educational outcomes that we desire. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are in continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge area.



Building on the findings in this part of our research series, BRAC has conducted a survey of citizens across the Baton Rouge area to determine public opinion on our public school systems, factors influencing student achievement, and the effectiveness of various reform initiatives. The results of the survey will be presented in the next part of this research series, which will compare these perceptions to reality in the Baton Rouge area. Finally, this series will conclude with an outline of programs and reform initiatives for improving student achievement in the Baton Rouge area.

September 7, 2006 • Part 4 of 5



**Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area:**  
Public Perceptions vs. Reality  
(Part 4 of a 5-part series)

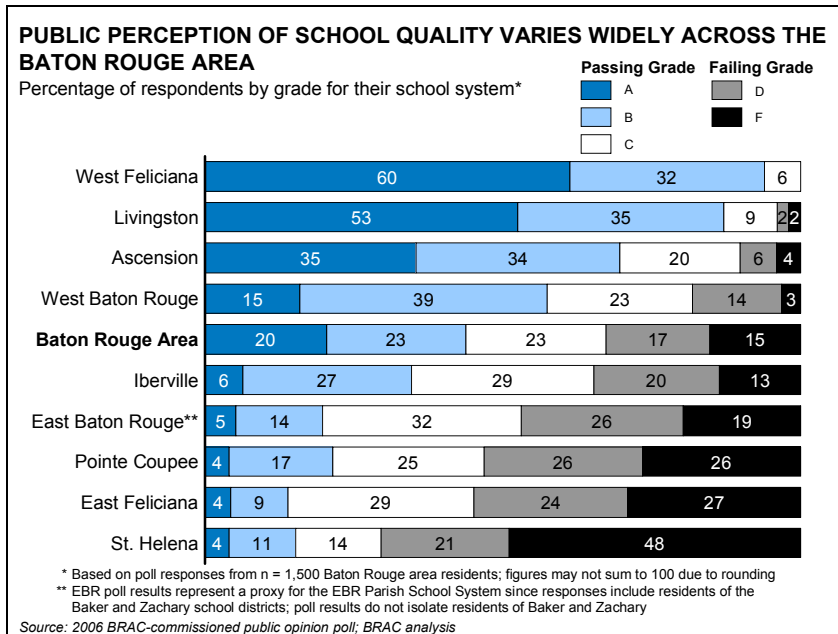
On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts in the region. As individuals and companies frequently look to the quality of public education as a major factor in market evaluation, BRAC recognizes the importance of this issue to economic development. Education is intrinsically tied to workforce development and capacity, including literacy and knowledge of basic skills, and is a fundamental driver of economic prosperity.

The first part of the research series provided an overview of student achievement and district performance in the Baton Rouge area. Part 2 compared public school districts in our region with those in other metropolitan areas across Louisiana and the southern United States. Part 3 examined a wide variety of “in-school” and “non-school” factors that impact student achievement, and assessed how public school districts in the Capital Region compare on these factors to their counterparts in peer regions. Among other things, the initial findings show that many factors, including non-school factors often associated with poverty, have a significant influence on student achievement.

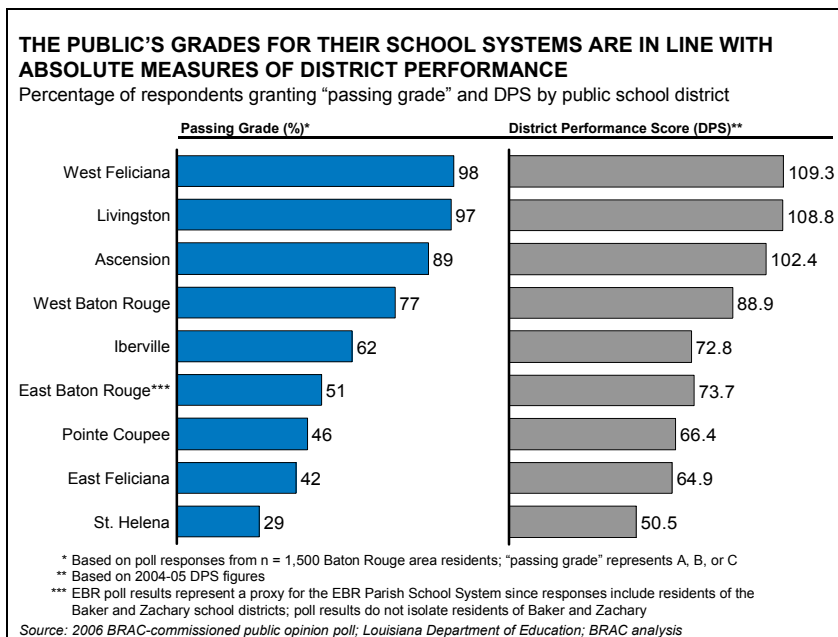
Building on the discussion in the first three installments of the series, Part 4 gauges public perceptions of school performance, factors that impact student achievement, and various potential reforms based on the results of a 1,500-person telephone poll conducted throughout the nine-parish Baton Rouge metropolitan area during the period June 22 through July 14, 2006 (before the first installment of this series was released to the public). Where appropriate, perceptions are compared to reality. Findings from this analysis provide a baseline understanding of public opinion and support for public schools, as well as public perceptions on specific reform ideas to improve student achievement in the Capital Region. The poll’s margin of error (for a 95 percent confidence interval) is less than  $\pm 3.0$  percent across the Capital Region as a whole, with  $\pm 4.5$  percent in East Baton Rouge,  $\pm 7.0$  percent in Ascension and Livingston, and  $\pm 10.0$  percent in the remaining six parishes.

### **Perceptions of Public Education in the Baton Rouge Area**

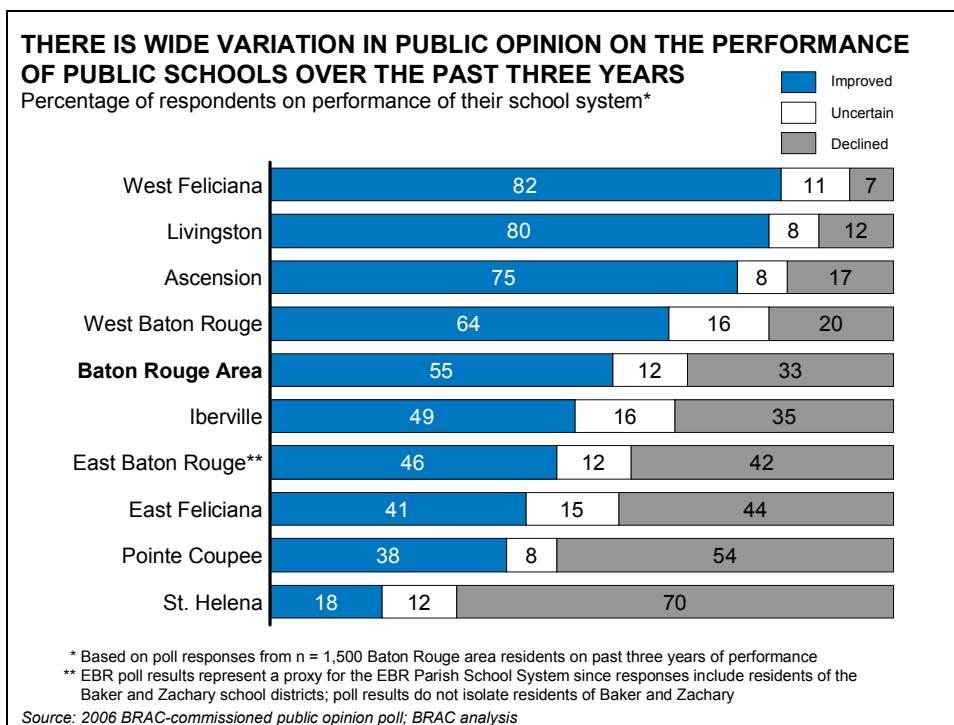
Across the Baton Rouge area, people have widely varying perceptions regarding the performance of their public school systems. One in five respondents believes that their public school system deserves an “A,” while 15 percent give their system an “F.” Opinions differ significantly by district. Over 50 percent of residents in West Feliciana grade their district’s performance with an “A,” but only 4 percent in St. Helena give their district top marks. In the region’s largest district—East Baton Rouge (EBR)—nearly one in five residents gives the system an “F.” Within EBR, respondents with relatively high levels of educational attainment tend to be tougher graders; only 17 percent of respondents with a college degree give EBR an “A” or “B,” while 50 percent of EBR residents who did not finish high school award those marks. Grades also differ across the region based on the educational choices of families, with public-school families generally giving higher marks to public schools than families with kids in private schools.



The grades assigned to public school districts correlate remarkably closely to their District Performance Scores (DPS), the broad-based measures of school performance calculated by the state each year (see Part 1 for more information on DPS). Additionally, the proportion of students in a district who are enrolled in public schools (i.e., versus non-public schools) also appears to be closely linked with public opinion, with higher proportions of public enrollment in West Feliciana (100%) and Livingston (99%) and lower proportions in Pointe Coupee (71%) and EBR (69%).



While more than half of all respondents feel that public education has improved over the past three years, a third believe that performance has declined. In reality, each of the eleven districts across the Baton Rouge area experiences fluctuations in performance from year to year. In the three most recent academic years for which data is available (2001-02 to 2004-05), however, every district exhibited substantial progress in its DPS. The improvement ranges from an increase in DPS of two percent in EBR to 20 percent in East Feliciana. Differences in opinion by individual districts are striking: while 42 percent of EBR respondents believe that school performance is in decline, fewer than 20 percent of residents in Ascension, Livingston, and West Feliciana hold this opinion about their district. On the other hand, a majority of residents in Pointe Coupee and St. Helena say the performance of their system is in decline.



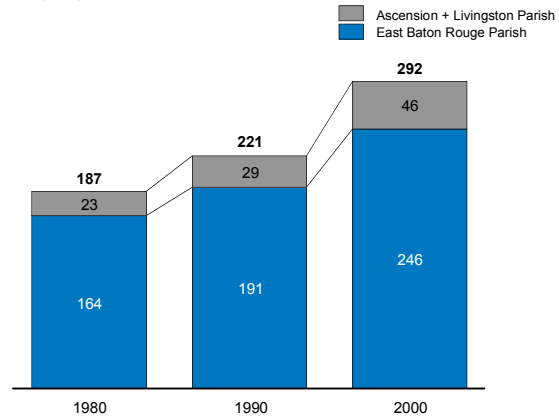
Still, it is also true that Baton Rouge area students continue to perform relatively poorly in absolute terms when compared to peer cities and regions across the southern United States. Based on average ACT scores, for example, student achievement in the Capital Region lags every selected region throughout the southern U.S., with the exception of the Jackson and New Orleans regions (see Part 2 for more information on our standing relative to other regions).

## The Impact of Perceptions: Movement of Families to Outlying Parishes

Perceptions of school performance appear to have a strong impact on the educational choices of families in the Baton Rouge area. In particular, lower public opinion on public education in EBR—compounded by perceptions of higher crime levels and greater housing costs—has encouraged the movement of area residents from EBR to outlying parishes like Ascension and Livingston. As these figures show, school enrollment has declined in EBR over the past few decades even as more than 80,000 jobs were created in the parish. This apparent paradox is largely explained by an increase in commuters to EBR from outlying parishes, plus a downward trend in the number of school-age children relative to the total population across the nation.

### WHILE EBR GENERATED THE VAST MAJORITY OF JOBS...

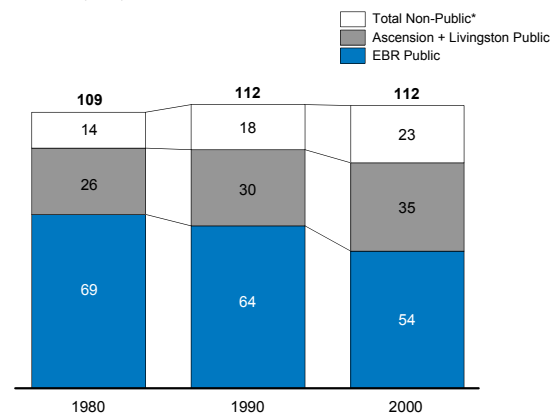
Total employment (000s)



\* Figures may not sum due to rounding  
Source: Louisiana Department of Labor; BRAC analysis

### ...EBR PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT STEADILY DECLINED...

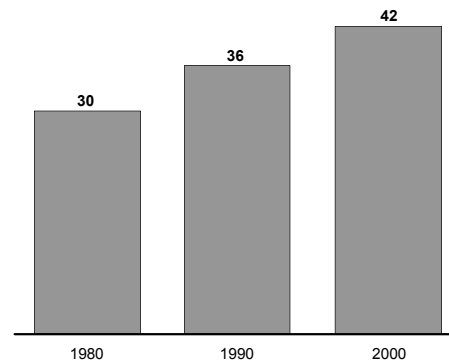
Total student enrollment (000s)



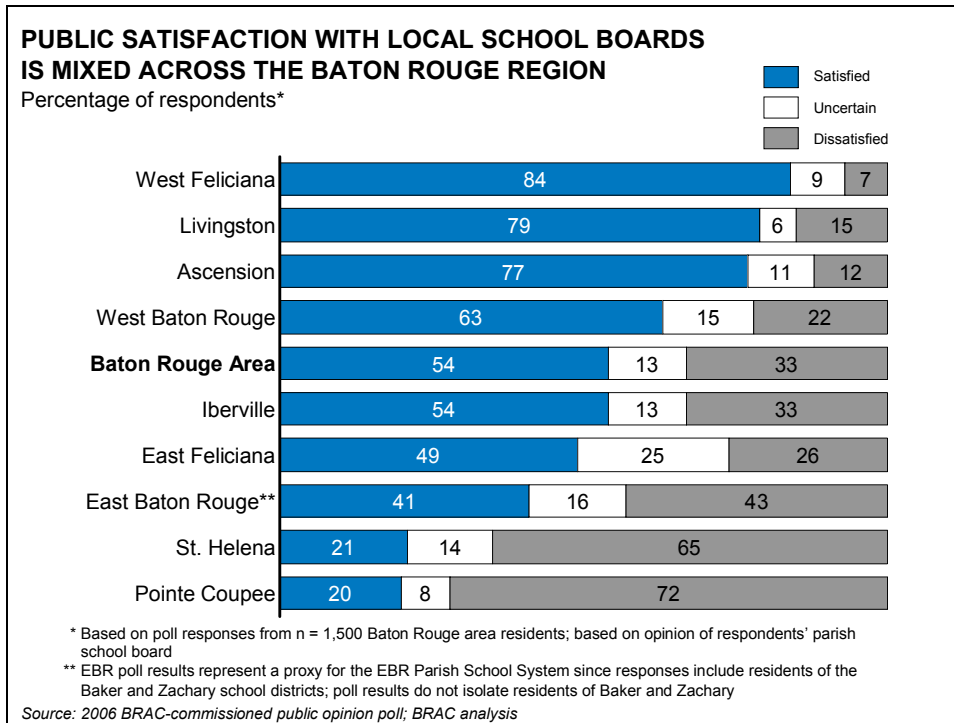
\* Cumulative total non-public enrollment in Ascension, EBR, and Livingston  
Source: Louisiana Department of Education; BRAC analysis

### ...AS FAMILIES MOVED TO OUTLYING PARISHES DESPITE THE COMMUTE

% of Livingston/ Ascension employed residents who commute to EBR

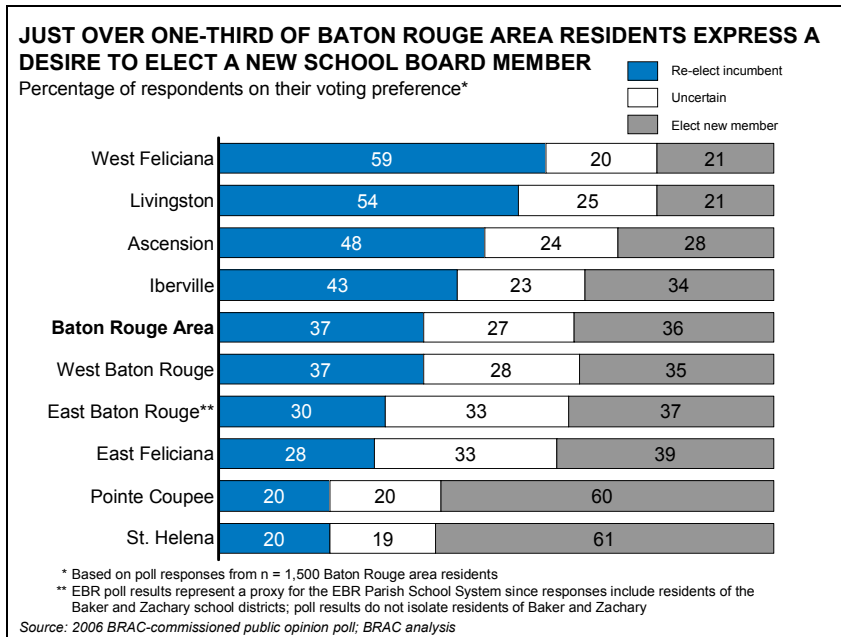


Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis; BRAC analysis



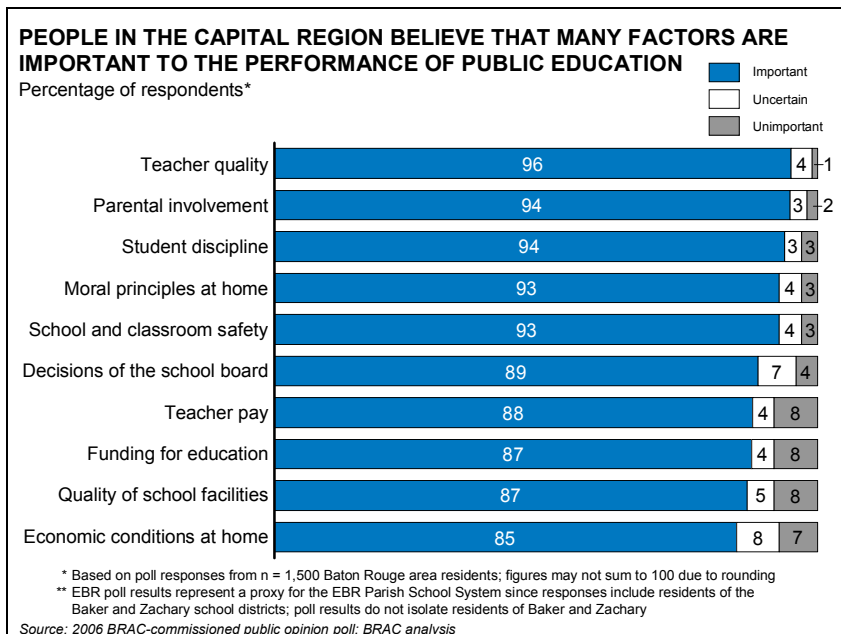
Not surprisingly, public satisfaction with district leaders and elected officials align closely with public perceptions of school performance. Across the Baton Rouge area, approximately half of residents are satisfied with their district school board and their individual school board member. On the other hand, one in three voters is dissatisfied with their district school board, and one in four is dissatisfied with their board member. The approval ratings are significantly higher in West Feliciana, Livingston, and Ascension. In contrast, just 41 percent of EBR residents express satisfaction with their parish school board and only about one in five residents of Pointe Coupee and St. Helena is satisfied with their school board.

Although a significant proportion of voters remain uncertain about their decision this fall, opinions regarding the performance of school boards and elected members are already quite clear in many cases. While 37 percent of residents across the Capital Region would like to keep their current school board members, approximately 36 percent indicate they would vote for someone new in the upcoming school board elections. In EBR, for instance, 37 percent of residents express a desire to elect new board members. In Pointe Coupee and St. Helena, a majority of residents want new representatives on their school board. On the other hand, only about one in five residents in Livingston and West Feliciana plans to vote for a challenger.

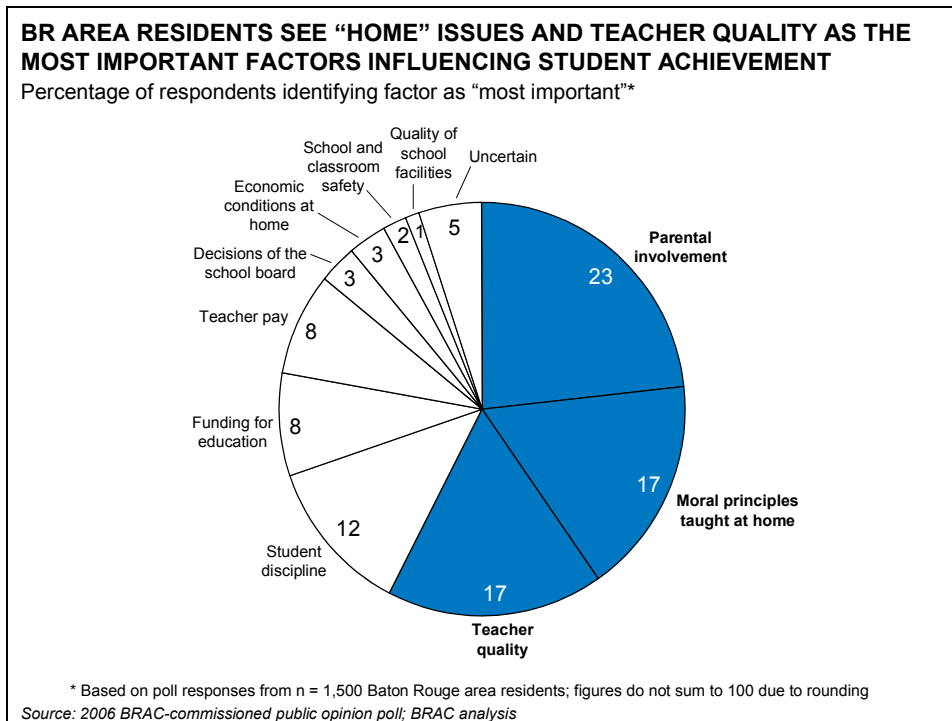


## Public Opinion on the Factors that Influence Student Achievement

Voters across the Capital Region recognize the importance of both in-school and non-school factors that impact student achievement. When polled on a variety of factors, respondents felt the importance of each was very high, ranging from 85 percent (economic conditions at home) to 96 percent (teacher quality). Similarly, very few survey participants responded that any given factor was unimportant.



Interestingly, people across the Baton Rouge area most commonly pick parental involvement as the most important factor impacting student achievement, with nearly one in four respondents singling-out this issue. In EBR, even more citizens (30 percent) believe the support of parents to be the most important determinant of student achievement, while across all other parishes, this figure decreases to 19 percent on average—tied with teacher quality in these districts. The focus on parental involvement increases sharply with the educational attainment of respondents.



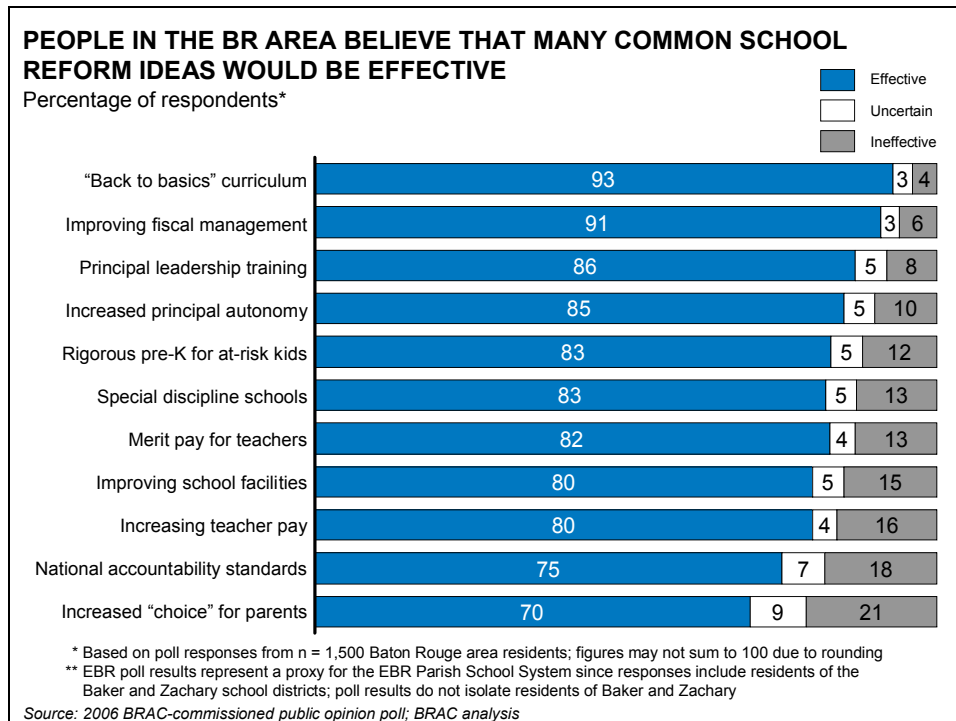
Similarly, “moral principles taught at home” ranks very high among voters, with 17 percent of residents giving this factor priority. The importance of “moral principles” as a factor receives broad endorsement from citizens across all parishes, of all levels of educational attainment, and with children in public and private schools. The cumulative proportion of responses that rate parental involvement and moral principles as the most important factors is a remarkable 40 percent (46 percent in EBR and 37 percent in outlying parishes on average). As seen in Part 3, the impact of non-school factors partially explains the lagging levels of student achievement in the Baton Rouge area despite comparable performance on most in-school factors. From this poll, it appears that many citizens across our area already recognize the relevance of parental support and moral values in the “formula” for academic success.

Teacher quality ties “moral principles” as the second most popular choice for the most important factor impacting student achievement, ranking high in urban, suburban, and rural districts alike and especially high among respondents with greater levels of educational attainment. The perception that teacher quality is among the most important performance determinants is in line with national research, which indicates that teacher

quality is particularly relevant in areas with significant demographic differences and economic disparity between districts and schools, such as the Baton Rouge area. According to various national studies, schools with high percentages of minority and/or at-risk students are more likely to be staffed with teachers who are uncertified, less experienced, or less qualified in their subject area. Notably, the presence of effective teachers for consecutive academic years is proven to help close the achievement gap between minority and at-risk students and their peers.

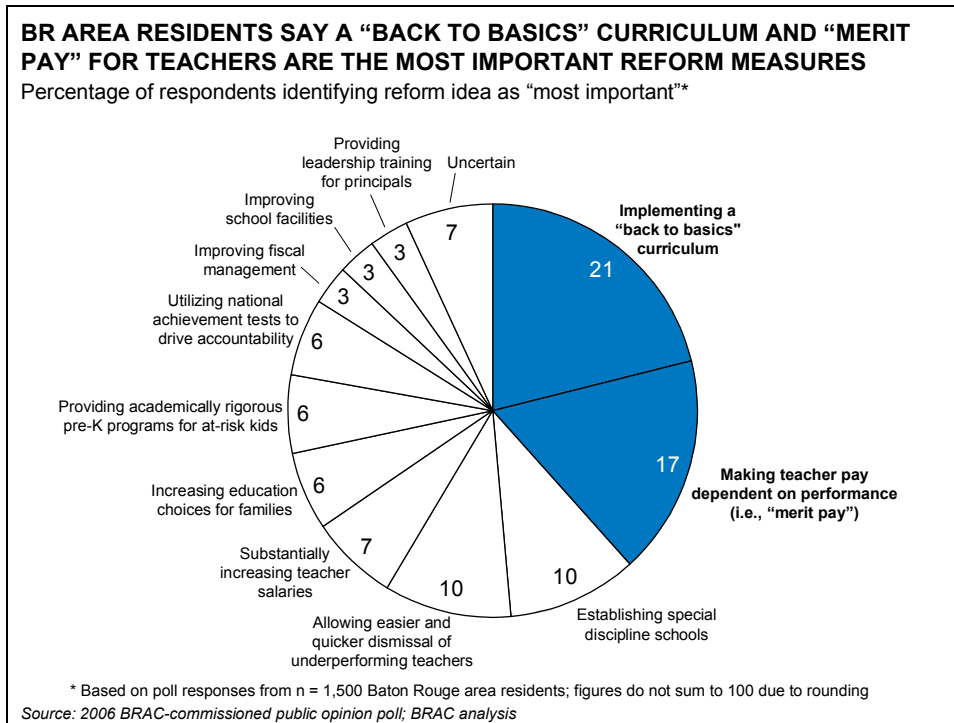
### Public Perceptions on Education Reform

Of the reform ideas presented to citizens across the Baton Rouge area, all were deemed effective by the vast majority of respondents, with some degree of variation. For example, 93 percent of participants believe a “back-to-basics” curriculum would be effective, while only 70 percent feel that increasing education choices for parents in failing schools would affect performance in our area. On the other hand, one in five respondents actually feels the latter solution would be ineffective—the highest degree of negative response among all reform ideas.



When asked to select the most important reform idea, 21 percent of respondents prioritize initiatives to “implement a ‘back to-basics’ curriculum with emphasis on reading, math, and science.” This solution ranks number one in EBR (26 percent) and all other parishes (19 percent), with a remarkably broad base of support across all demographic categories. This response likely indicates great concern among citizens that many children in our region are not learning the basic skills necessary to succeed in school and in the workforce, as confirmed in Part 1 of this series with the finding that 40

percent of students across the Capital Region fail to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. From this poll, it is clear that voters would support an initiative to re-focus our curriculum to ensure that, at a minimum, students learn basic skills in key subject areas.



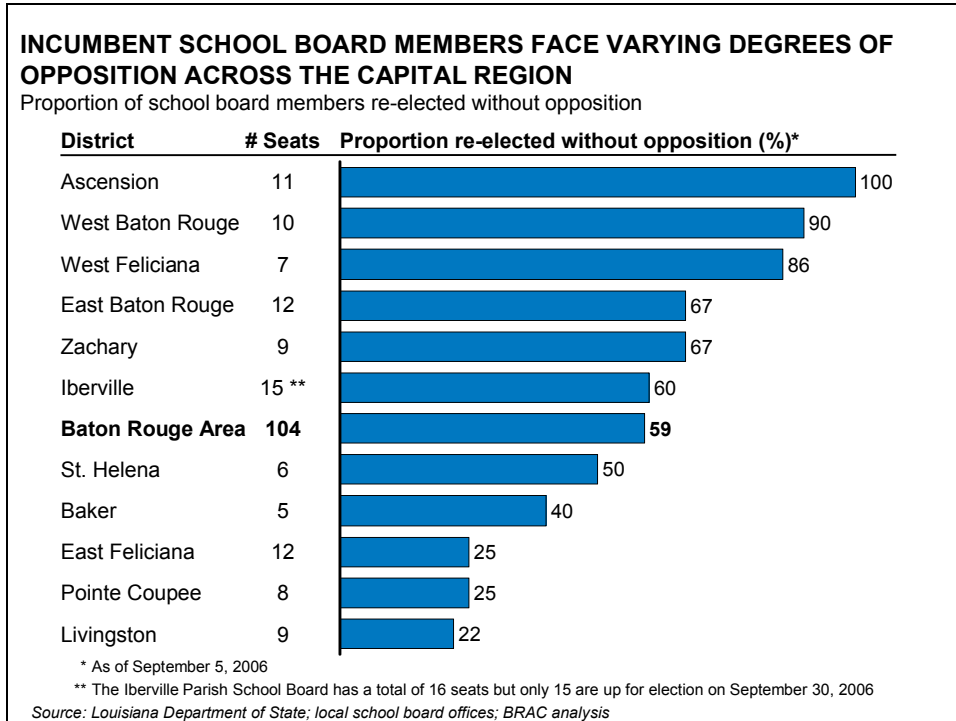
Instituting a merit pay program for teachers (i.e., “making teacher pay dependent on performance”) closely follows curriculum reform as the most important potential solution to enhancing student performance in the Baton Rouge area. Seventeen percent of voters across the region believe this to be the most important reform initiative, ranking second in EBR and in many outlying parishes (though another 13 percent say merit pay initiatives are ineffective). Interestingly, only seven percent of respondents feel that “substantially increasing teacher pay” would be the most important factor in elevating student achievement, though this choice registers much more strongly among families with children in public schools. Indeed, as discussed in Part 3, teacher salaries in the Baton Rouge area generally are comparable with those in peer regions, including Austin, Jackson, Lafayette, Mobile, and Shreveport. The public appears to believe that linking teacher pay with performance may be more important to improving student achievement than simply raising salaries, and through this poll, they indicate significant support for such an initiative.

## Conclusion

Voters across the Baton Rouge area demonstrate considerable understanding of their public school systems, although some perceptions do not line up with reality. For instance, citizens accurately gauge the performance of public school districts in

absolute terms, but one in three apparently are not aware of the increases in performance that have been made across our area in recent years as measured by DPS.

Regardless of the reality, however, public perceptions impact voter plans in the upcoming elections and their expectations for elected school board members. A majority of residents in Pointe Coupee and St. Helena wish to replace their current board member. In contrast, fewer than 30 percent of voters in Ascension, Livingston, and West Feliciana—where satisfaction is much higher—wish to elect new members on September 30. Additionally, incumbent school board members appear to face less competition in areas where voter satisfaction is relatively high. Most strikingly, in Ascension—where 77 percent of respondents express satisfaction with the current school board—100 percent of incumbent board members have been re-elected without opposition. On the other hand, most of the school board seats in Pointe Coupee will be contested on September 30, apparently reflecting a political climate where 72 percent of respondents are dissatisfied with the current board. While voter satisfaction is much higher in some districts than others, it is nevertheless important to maintain a high sense of urgency on public education throughout the Baton Rouge area, as even in our top-ranked districts one in four students fails to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and math. The results in lower-ranked districts are even more troubling (see Part 1 for more information on student achievement).



Although public education receives considerably higher marks in most outlying districts than in EBR, one third of citizens across the Capital Region grade our schools with a “D” or “F.” This indicates a tough road ahead for our elected officials and school

administrators, who must work to firm up public approval, trust, and support. In response, the second half of this poll offers an indication of public support for various reform initiatives that may advance student achievement. Voters indicate a very high level of support for numerous reform initiatives and prioritize two—a “back-to-basics” curriculum and merit pay for teachers—which deserve attention and debate in the weeks ahead, as citizens prepare to select the leaders of their schools systems. Perhaps most importantly, however, citizens across the Capital Region seem to understand that both in-school and non-school factors have a profound influence on the quality of a child’s education, with respondents most frequently identifying parental involvement, moral principles taught at home, and teacher quality as the most important factors impacting student achievement. Leaders in the Baton Rouge area should aim to address these and other critically important factors when designing and implementing school reform initiatives to improve student achievement in our region.



The fifth and final installment of this research series will outline a series of public education reform initiatives for improving student achievement in the Baton Rouge area. Building upon existing programs and projects, the reform initiatives will be evaluated for their applicability, estimated cost, and potential impact on student achievement. These potential reform initiatives will be presented for Baton Rouge area citizens to consider as they assess issues and candidates for the September 2006 school board elections and beyond.

*The BRAC-commissioned poll referenced in this study was conducted by Market Research Insight (i.e., Verne Kennedy): [www.mri-research.com](http://www.mri-research.com)*

September 12, 2006 • Part 5 of 5



**Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area:**  
An Agenda for Reform  
(Part 5 of a 5-part series)



Baton Rouge Area Chamber®

On September 30, voters throughout the nine-parish Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts in the region. As individuals and companies frequently look to the quality of public education as a major factor in market evaluation, BRAC recognizes the importance of this issue to economic development. Education is intrinsically tied to workforce development and capacity, including literacy and knowledge of basic skills, and is a fundamental driver of economic prosperity.

Part 1 of the research series provided an overview of student achievement and district performance in the Baton Rouge area. Part 2 compared public school districts in our region with those in other metropolitan areas across Louisiana and the southern U.S. Part 3 examined the major in-school and non-school factors that impact student achievement and assessed how public school districts in the Capital Region compare on these factors to their counterparts in peer regions. Part 4 gauged public perceptions of school performance, factors that impact student achievement, and various potential reforms based on the results of a 1,500-person phone survey conducted throughout the Baton Rouge area. Among other things, the findings in Parts 1-4 show that many factors, including non-school factors often associated with poverty, have a significant influence on student achievement. Building upon Parts 1-4, this fifth and final part of the series outlines a menu of substantive public education reform initiatives for the Baton Rouge area, each designed to increase student achievement.

The specific knowledge and experience of many top education experts from across the Capital Region and the U.S. is represented in this report, including current and former state leaders, national policy experts, nonprofit executives, district superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and others.

## **Public Education Reform: A Test for Our Region**

This research series has clearly shown that the Baton Rouge area has a long way to go before its public schools generate student achievement levels that can be considered an asset to economic development efforts in the region. Roughly 40 percent of our public-school students cannot read, write, and do math at a basic level. Even in our region's highest performing districts, over 25 percent of public-school students fail to demonstrate basic skills in these critically important subject areas. As a result, thousands of children leave our public schools every year without the basic literacy and numeracy skills required to succeed in the workplace, let alone to successfully pursue higher education. And most of the children failing to attain basic skills through their schooling come from low-income families.

While our research has shown that public schools in most peer regions exhibit higher student achievement levels than students in our area public schools, our findings also show that none of our peers have been broadly successful in educating children from low-income families. In fact, most of the differences between the higher achievement levels of our peers and those of public-school students in our region can be attributed to

socioeconomic differences, as even the most affluent parishes in our region have poverty levels above the national average. This means that, for our region to ensure that the vast majority of children gain a basic level of literacy and numeracy, we must achieve at a regional level what all of our peers have not: we must help a large population of children from low-income families succeed in school.

Increasing student achievement among children from low-income families likely is the most difficult economic development challenge we will face as a community. Unlike other areas in need of reform (e.g., transportation, business taxes, governmental ethics, higher education), the solutions for our public schools are less clear and more difficult to implement. Nevertheless, our commitment to do so will be a true measure of the character and strength of our community and will define to a substantial degree our long-term economic potential.

Through a combination of state and local efforts, progress in public education clearly is being made, as all 11 school districts in our region have exhibited substantial improvement as measured by District Performance Scores (DPS) since the state's accountability system was implemented approximately eight years ago. But so far the increases in student achievement overall have been relatively modest compared to our aspirations. Our regional community must assertively address our public education challenges with greater urgency and resolve, with a greater commitment from each of the major stakeholders to move forward and make the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement.

The scope of our research is insufficient for us to provide a roadmap to high student achievement levels for each public school in our region. Indeed, a comprehensive plan for each public school district and school is more appropriately developed with the active involvement of the superintendent, school board, teachers, parents, and principals working together. This targeted approach is especially warranted given the dramatic differences among the public school systems in the Baton Rouge area. Accordingly, each school district—and even each school—will require a different mix of initiatives to be successful.

Nevertheless, based on research and input from various experts and practitioners, we believe the following reform principles and initiatives apply to most public school districts in our region and that, if passionately and rigorously implemented, could result in the significant improvements in student achievement that have so far eluded us.

## Principles of Reform

Our research, interviews, and analysis have led us to believe that successful campaigns to increase student achievement in our public schools will be grounded in a set of guiding principles. Several of the following 10 principles of reform have been applied successfully in business turnarounds. While these reform principles are not comprehensive, they do represent a foundation for the design and implementation of a successful reform agenda.

1. **Maintain high expectations for all students.** While it is important to recognize the challenges of poverty and cultural differences in learning, school leaders should also recognize that all students can be high performers with the sustained support of parents, teachers, principals, and administrators. Schools that expressly and implicitly show confidence in the strengths and abilities of all students establish a supportive environment and foundation necessary for progress.
2. **Account for unique student needs.** Our research clearly shows that public schools in our area educate a highly diverse student population. In this context, school leaders should design programs that will be successful for all students. In some cases, this may mean providing targeted resources to help students who face greater challenges at home and/or have fallen behind.
3. **Meaningfully engage each major stakeholder group in the reform agenda.** Teachers have a large influence on student achievement, but they cannot do it alone. Likewise, parental involvement plays a major factor in student success, but parents cannot be solely responsible for achievement either. Any broadly successful reform agenda will require the active participation of each major stakeholder group—students, parents, teachers, principals, and administrators—as well as the broader community.
4. **Implement strategies supported by research.** The last few decades have seen an exponential increase in education research. Fortunately, this has resulted in a large amount of useful knowledge illustrating which strategies have been successful and which ones have not. School district leaders should take advantage of this body of research in designing programs to increase student achievement.
5. **Focus energy and attention on high-impact initiatives.** A classic mistake of reform efforts in both the public and private sectors is to focus on too many different initiatives at once. While any plan will require multiple elements to be successful, school leaders should focus their scarce resources (including both leadership attention and money) on those initiatives most likely to generate the greatest impact. Other improvement efforts can be delayed until major reforms have successfully taken hold.
6. **Phase implementation efforts where appropriate.** In the private sector, pilot projects often are utilized where a new strategy has not yet been validated or is not fully refined, enabling adjustments before wider implementation is attempted. When new innovations are attempted in the school system, school leaders should determine whether a pilot implementation may be in order before a rapid, full rollout.

7. **Where appropriate, aggressively partner with national foundations and the private sector.** Leading foundations and corporations commit millions of dollars per year toward initiatives designed to increase student achievement. Although the reform agendas of our school districts should not be dictated by these organizations, administrators should nevertheless seek out partnerships with national foundations and the private sector, which can offer not only funding but implementation insights as well.
8. **Actively communicate with the community at large.** Generating public understanding, support, and commitment for reform is critical to its successful implementation. In order to build public confidence and trust, successes should be celebrated publicly just as shortcomings should be acknowledged in order to build public confidence and trust. Administrators and school leaders also should create opportunities for meaningful dialogue with parents, community leaders, and the community at large.
9. **Employ a rigorous, data-driven approach to execution.** All initiatives should be monitored with a rigorous data-driven approach to ensure they are performing as expected. An objective, data-driven review can illuminate opportunities to refine strategies and show where reform efforts are exceeding expectations or falling short. Effective implementation is just as important as the plan itself.
10. **Sustain commitment to the reform agenda over time.** Far too many reform efforts have fallen short because they were abandoned before having an opportunity to truly take hold. Immediate results may not be seen in some cases, as some initiatives are geared toward long-term, systemic impact. Administrators and school leaders must be careful to not let the “flavor of the month” take the place of a deliberate, comprehensive reform agenda.

## **An Agenda for Reform**

The onset of school board elections throughout the Baton Rouge area represents an opportune time for our community to reflect on the status of public education today and to recommit our efforts to improve student achievement levels throughout the region. Our hope is that each school board and superintendent will use this transition period to evaluate the success of their current efforts and identify opportunities for improvement. Citizens who foot the bill for public education, businesses who count on the products of public schools, and our children deserve nothing less.

National research provides us with practical, evidence-based models for improving student achievement, offering a menu of ideas for making public school systems in the Baton Rouge area stronger and more effective at educating our children. Following are 28 initiatives that offer proven or promising potential for raising student achievement. Some districts in the Baton Rouge area have already taken action on some or many of these initiatives. Thus, while not all recommendations apply to all 11 districts in the Capital Region, together they represent a relatively comprehensive “toolbox” of initiatives with which to approach public education reform.

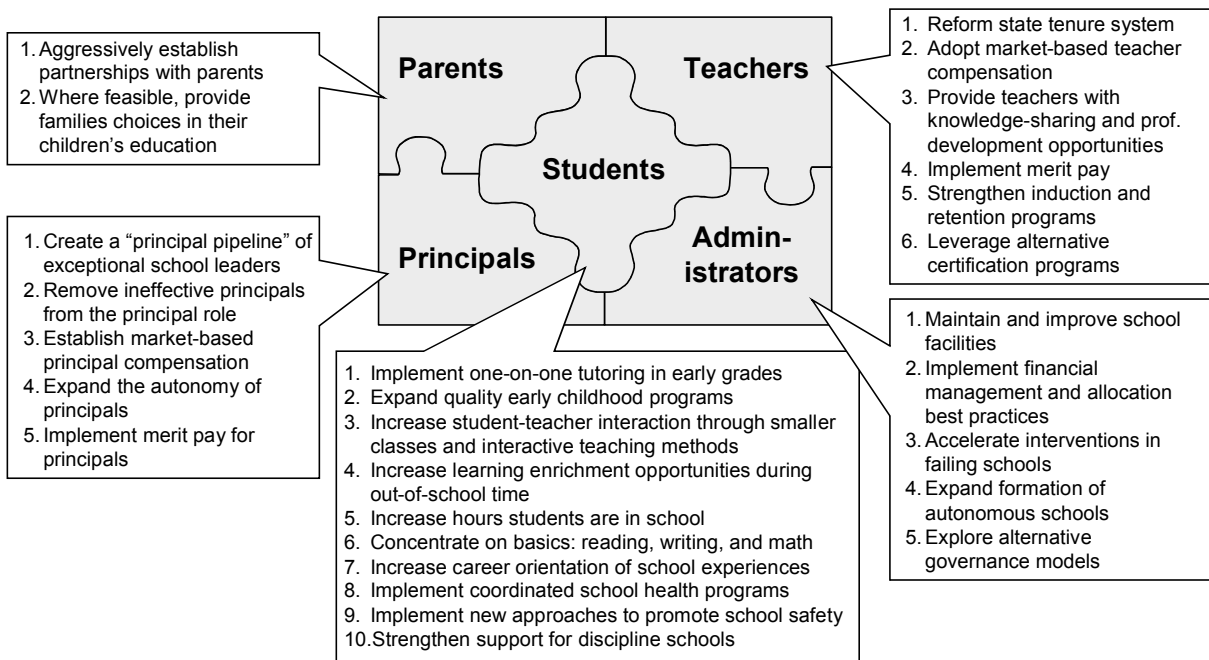
The reform initiatives are organized by the major public education stakeholder groups: students, parents, teachers, principals, and administrators. For each initiative, we have provided a preliminary estimate of implementation cost (on a *per impacted student* and *total region-wide* basis) and approximate impact on student achievement. The initiative costs can be evaluated against our region’s current annual public education spending levels—roughly \$7,200 per student and \$780 million total across the 11 school districts.

If implemented with sustained and aggressive commitment over time, we estimate that a high impact initiative could bring over 10 percent of our underperforming students up to basic levels in reading, writing, and mathematics. A medium impact initiative could elevate performance of five to 10 percent of our underperforming students to basic levels, and a low impact initiative would elevate less than five percent of underperforming students to basic levels. These estimates are for individual initiatives; the cumulative impact of multiple initiatives may be less than the sum of the individual initiatives acting alone because each incremental initiative applies to a successively smaller number of underperforming students.

We have chosen to expand the detail of four compelling reform initiatives—those listed first for the students, parents, teachers, and principals stakeholder groups—that could be of particular relevance to our Baton Rouge area school districts given their estimated high impact on student achievement, relatively low cost, and/or particular relevance to the large at-risk student population that characterizes our region.

**MENU OF PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVES**

NOT COMPREHENSIVE



## Students

As student achievement is the focus of our public schools, reform initiatives should be prioritized by their potential to materially improve our students' ability to learn. Baton Rouge area public schools face a host of challenges associated with poverty to an extent not seen in most peer regions. Reforms should directly address this issue, while maintaining the flexibility to accommodate the varied learning needs of a diverse student population. Included below are ten strategies focused on directly elevating student performance in the Capital Region.

Student initiatives	Cost to implement		Impact on student achievement
	Per impacted student (\$/year)	Region-wide (\$ MM/year)	
1. Implement one-on-one tutoring for at-risk students in early grades	600-1,600	10-30	High
2. Expand quality early childhood programs	3,000-9,000	10-30	High
3. Increase student-teacher interaction through smaller classes and interactive teaching methods	650-950	70-110	Med-High
4. Increase learning enrichment opportunities during out-of-school time	250-2,500	20-170	Med-High
5. Increase hours students are in school	500-2,000	50-220	Med-High
6. Concentrate on basic skills: reading, writing, and mathematics	10-20	1-2	Med
7. Increase career orientation of students' school experiences	125-300	5-10	Med
8. Implement coordinated school health programs	50-160	3-11	Med
9. Implement creative and comprehensive approaches to promote school safety	10-25	1-3	Low-Med
10. Strengthen support for discipline schools	700-2,500	1-3	Low

### Students (1): Implement one-on-one tutoring for at-risk students in early grades

Many students in the Baton Rouge area—particularly those coming from low-income families—begin school at a stage of learning development that falls below the standards for their age. Over time, the achievement gap between these students and their peers typically grows, making it increasingly difficult to close the gap in middle and high school. For such situations, national research suggests that one-on-one tutoring with a highly structured curriculum is the most effective form of remediation for students who have fallen behind.

In Louisiana, as a result of summer preparation and re-testing in 2006, an additional six percent of fourth graders and eighth graders passed the minimum requirements of LEAP. On the other hand, 22 and 29 percent of fourth and eighth graders still did not pass the high-stakes test. In addition to numerous ad hoc projects, there are three major federal-state programs that offer after-school tutoring services, primarily for at-risk students: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, After School for All, and

Supplementary Educational Services (SES). While these programs support after-school tutoring and enrichment programs for many at-risk students in the Capital Region—particularly in East Baton Rouge, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, and St. Helena—they offer services to a relatively small proportion of the regional at-risk student population. An even smaller proportion actually participates. Administrative challenges include an absence of coordinated state policy, a shortage of qualified service providers, poor coordination among providers and schools or districts, and limited monitoring and evaluation capacity. Obstacles to student participation include low levels of parental knowledge and interest, competing after-school activities, and lack of transportation.

National case studies and research suggest that, by providing one-on-one tutoring services *during the school day*, schools can overcome many of these challenges while providing the most effective form of remediation on a relatively cost-efficient basis. For example, the Reading One-To-One program has provided low-cost, one-on-one remedial tutoring in reading and writing to at-risk elementary school children in 23 cities across the nation. The program achieves cost efficiencies by using college students, community members, and paraprofessionals as trained tutors during the school day instead of more costly teachers. Guided by specific curricula that become more advanced as students move up through the tutoring levels, tutors provide one-on-one services to students in 40-minute sessions three to four times per week. Because tutoring sessions are held during the school day, tutors can work “block” schedules on a regular basis, improving their incentive structure and productivity while providing students with consistent, knowledgeable support. Depending on the size of the district, one or more full-time officials coordinate the recruitment and training activities and marketing and delivery of services. Evaluations of Reading One-To-One show that participating students experienced significant increases in academic achievement relative to non-participating peers, equaling about a half a grade level for students in early grades. In addition to improving access to and coordination of existing programs, districts in the Baton Rouge area could target Title I funds toward these types of cost-efficient programs that provide the most effective remedial services to at-risk students. To balance costs, the program could be launched at the kindergarten level and phased in to later grades as increasing proportions of at-risk students meet grade-level expectations.

### **Students (2): Expand quality early childhood programs**

Research demonstrates that three and four-year-old children who participate in quality early childhood programs have higher scores on math and reading tests, greater language abilities, and higher graduation rates. Some experts estimate that enrolling all three-and four-year-old children from low-income families in quality pre-kindergarten courses could close up to 20 percent of the achievement gap. In our region, West Feliciana excelled by implementing early childhood programs in the 1990s; student achievement levels have indeed improved since the programs were put into place. However, many districts in the Baton Rouge area operate more in line with state averages, with only 43 percent of 4-year olds enrolled in pre-kindergarten despite the general availability of Head Start and LA4 programs. Districts in the Baton Rouge area should consider investing in needed facilities and greatly expanding their marketing and

outreach programs to low-income families to drive enrollment levels in these available pre-kindergarten programs.

**Students (3): Increase student-teacher interaction through smaller classes and interactive teaching methods**

Smaller classes provide teachers and students with increased interaction—including eye contact, the formation of positive and nurturing relationships, and small group activities—proven to particularly benefit minority and at-risk students, especially in the early grades. Tennessee’s Project STAR—a ground breaking K-3 class size reduction program conducted in the late 1980s—recently found that these students were more likely to continue out-performing peers even in high school, graduate on schedule and in the top 25 percent of their class, and pursue a college education. Although the student-teacher ratio across the Baton Rouge area (15.2) is comparable to our peer regions, there continues to be a wide range in class sizes across the region (see Part 3 for more information on student-teacher ratios). While 67 percent of Pointe Coupee classes have less than 20 students, only 27 percent of St. Helena classes are this small. To increase student-teacher interaction in the Baton Rouge area, districts would need to identify funding sources for additional teachers and encourage all teachers to increase their usage of small group work and interactive teaching methods—possibly through new training programs or teacher awards and incentives.

**Students (4): Increase learning enrichment opportunities during out-of-school time**

Providing opportunities for education and enrichment activities outside of normal school hours has been shown to improve student achievement levels, particularly for at-risk children. One creative national initiative, Citizen Schools, engages urban middle-school students in weekly apprenticeships taught by volunteer professionals who share their expertise in 10-week projects; participants have scored higher on class and state tests, have better attendance rates, and tend to enroll in college-track high schools. In the Baton Rouge area, at least ten sites are being funded through the state’s After School For All program to provide after-hours activities for students from high-poverty schools. Districts in the Capital Region should seek opportunities to fund additional programs and aggressively encourage their at-risk students to participate. Nurturing and expanding community partnerships, such as the Louisiana Afterschool Partnership with the Mott Foundation, could help school districts build and promote exciting new education, enrichment, and recreation programs for at-risk children.

**Students (5): Increase hours students are in school**

Although subject to considerable debate, many experts suggest that extending in-school hours can boost student achievement and enable U.S. students to better compete with other industrialized countries that have much longer school years. Across the country, over two million children in 47 states are currently enrolled in year-round schools—mostly public schools—rather than schools employing the traditional 180-day academic year and six-hour school day. Many charter schools report substantial benefits from a longer school year. Increasing school time in the Baton Rouge area would require overcoming often-seen resistance from parents, teachers, and students. Despite these

challenges, our school districts should further investigate the merits of increased instructional time and consider extending students' time in class if student achievement gains are likely.

**Students (6): Concentrate on basic skills: reading, writing, and mathematics**

Given that only 60 percent of Baton Rouge area public-school students demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics on statewide standardized tests, renewed instructional focus on these essential subjects may be warranted. Our state has recently developed a statewide curriculum to provide more uniformity in the way basic subjects are taught throughout the state. Additionally, our state (and locally, Baker) has participated in the national Reading First program, which triples support for K-3 reading instruction. Across the country, results from the first year of this program indicate that Reading First kindergarteners—typically low-performing, high-poverty students—outperformed non-Reading First kindergarteners. Based on this success, Louisiana has begun implementing the *Louisiana Literacy Plan* in 2006, which will expand the Reading First model to students at all grade levels and require districts to have literacy improvement plans (West Baton Rouge is one of five pilot districts). To implement a “back-to-basics” initiative in the Baton Rouge area, districts could aggressively implement the *Louisiana Literacy Plan* and develop similar programs for mathematics. Additionally, districts could encourage teachers to incorporate basic skills, to the extent possible, into non-basic courses (i.e., art).

**Students (7): Increase career orientation of students' school experiences**

Community citizens and experts cite the need for young people to be informed of their future employment opportunities, as well as the qualifications for their chosen career goals, whether they involve post-secondary education or vocational training. There are several noteworthy career-building initiatives across the Baton Rouge area. Livingston high schools offer career and technical education courses in fields ranging from agriculture to computer repair to nursing. East Baton Rouge has dual enrollment programs with area universities and technical colleges—where qualifying juniors and seniors receive transportation services, books, and tuition free of charge. Districts across the Capital Region should consider replicating and further coordinating successful programs such as those offered in Livingston and East Baton Rouge. In addition, districts could increase the number of specialized career guidance counselors and the level of support and training for these professionals. With an additional level of focus, districts could better ensure that students are enrolled in those courses and programs most aligned with their career interests and abilities.

**Students (8): Implement coordinated school health programs (CSHPs)**

Experts agree that the physical and mental needs of children must be met in order for them to realize their full learning potential, and CSHPs—comprehensive student health and wellness programs—can play significant roles in addressing these needs. Across the Baton Rouge area, several districts have established Louisiana School-Based Health Centers, which provide students with access to medical, social, and mental health services. In St. Helena, clinics are located on two of the three district campuses and have been visited over 4,000 times since opening in 1998 and 2000. There are also

eight school-based clinics in East Baton Rouge, a mobile clinic for students and parents in Baker, and a school-based family services center in West Feliciana. Districts should consider significantly expanding on these programs such that the majority of at-risk students are receiving the necessary health services to fully participate in class. Partnerships with Federally Qualified Health Centers and other Medicaid funding sources can be leveraged to offset the substantial costs.

**Students (9): Implement creative and comprehensive approaches to promote school safety**

Combining the establishment and enforcement of zero tolerance policies with positive interventions—such as conflict resolution, drug awareness, bullying prevention, and mentoring programs—has proven effective at reducing violence and crime in schools and improving student test scores. For instance, New Iberia’s Early Intervention program has garnered national attention for its successful efforts in identifying and addressing the needs of students with behavioral problems. According to teachers, 78 percent of children in the program in 2004-05 showed improvements in behavior, and nearly half improved their test scores. Although there are several safety initiatives ongoing in the Baton Rouge area, districts should consider adopting comprehensive and creative approaches that incorporate partnerships with social workers and other professionals for counseling and assistance.

**Students (10): Strengthen support for discipline schools**

Parents and teachers express concerns about individual student discipline issues disrupting the learning environment for an entire class. “Schools of last resort” provide an opportunity for students with behavior problems to improve their conduct and their future, provide our education systems an opportunity to re-engage a young person in learning, and create a mechanism to protect the learning experience for other students. The major discipline school in the Capital Region is Valley Park Alternative School in East Baton Rouge, where approximately 100 students in grades six through 12 operate under scaled-up drug and violence prevention efforts. In order to boost capacity, districts with significant discipline problems would need to provide the substantial resources required for such schools to be effective, including qualified teachers with classroom management training, a curriculum focused on basic skills, tutoring and remediation opportunities, and career planning that is tailored to the specific needs of students in discipline schools.

**Parents**

With the average child spending roughly 87 percent of his or her waking hours from birth through age 18 outside of school, the influence of parents and the home environment is critical to student development. Well designed programs that encourage active parental involvement in a child’s education—both at school and at home—can profoundly impact academic achievement. The initiatives listed below seek to engage parents as partners with Baton Rouge area schools, uniting and maximizing our resources to realize student success.

<b>Parent initiatives</b>	<b>Cost to implement</b>		<b>Impact on student achievement</b>
	<b>Per impacted student (\$/year)</b>	<b>Region-wide (\$ MM/year)</b>	
1. Aggressively establish partnerships with parents	20-40	2-5	High
2. Where feasible, provide families choices in their children’s education	125-250	1-3	Low-Med

**Parents (1): Aggressively establish partnerships with parents**

Numerous nationally recognized studies have concluded that parental participation in children’s school activities can have a significant impact on student achievement. Attendance of parents at parent-teacher conferences, discussions with school officials, participation in school events, class visits, volunteering opportunities, and other means of engagement in their children’s school activities are all critically important. Yet it often takes enormous effort to engage these families—many who had difficulties in school themselves and are accustomed to being contacted only for negative feedback related to their child. Some face transportation problems and many are raising their children without a spouse or other family support, while others may work multiple jobs, night shifts, or weekends. Nevertheless, research indicates that parents’ participation and support are critical to their children’s achievement in school.

In the Baton Rouge area, existing and past efforts to engage parents—typically focused on specific schools and over short spans of time—have achieved some success. The Children’s Charter School in East Baton Rouge, for example, sends vans to pick up parents for events that are followed by dinner, leading to a 75 percent turn-out rate. West Feliciana requires all teachers to visit the homes of incoming children prior to the start of the school year. Two nationally-recognized teachers in Ascension have increased parental attendance from 15 to 85 percent at “open-house” nights for their at-risk, special education classes through a variety of nearly cost-free, creative initiatives, such as sending postcard invitations to parents. Other initiatives underway include the parental resource center at Capitol Pre-College Academy for Boys in East Baton Rouge and the Academic Distinction Fund’s Parents in Action program.

While schools are required to spend one percent of their federal Title I funds for parental involvement, such limited resources and a loose patchwork of initiatives can have only limited impact. Districts should consider building on existing initiatives to form a coordinated outreach effort, supported by a dedicated system-level coordinator and

team to provide guidance, maintain a sense of urgency, and drive the program into schools and classrooms. National experts have identified innovative, practical ideas for increasing parental involvement, such as recruiting families as volunteers in schools and offering parental training. Through the non-profit National Network of Partnership Schools, action teams—supported by district and state leadership—have put these ideas into practice across the country, resulting in better student attendance, fewer disciplinary actions, and improved math, science, reading, and writing skills.

For a system-wide initiative to succeed, our school leaders need to establish parental involvement as a fundamental element of each school’s planning and daily operations. Training and exposure to best practices—such as those implemented by National Network of Partnership Schools—could encourage principals and teachers to create stronger partnerships with parents by better capitalizing on the moments when parents are visiting campus. Modest and eventually significant increases in our community’s family involvement in education is a critically important step in becoming a “Learning Community”—a place where formal and informal education are widely embraced, where workers seek and prepare for knowledge-based jobs, and where lifelong learning is a common pursuit of our culture.

**Parents (2): Where feasible, provide families choices in their children’s education**

Families with children in failing schools should have the ability to transfer to a more successful public school, a magnet school, a charter school, or potentially a private school through a carefully designed voucher program. In Louisiana, charter schools and magnet schools represent the most widely available options for parents in our public school systems. In particular, quasi-independent charter schools have more freedom with regard to how the school is run and often develop student populations that outperform district averages. The three charter schools in the Baton Rouge area are located in East Baton Rouge, which also offers magnet schools at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Choices for parents outside of East Baton Rouge are currently more limited in nature. School systems should welcome family concerns regarding their children’s education and seriously consider, when financially and operationally feasible, offering families the option to transfer to a different school if it would benefit their children’s academic development.

## Teachers

Experts increasingly state that the influence of teachers is the single most important in-school factor in determining student achievement, with cumulative, lasting effects on students as they advance. Motivated, talented teachers can enable students to achieve profound learning gains through their daily interactions and instruction. By ensuring that our region’s classrooms are led by dedicated, competent individuals armed with proven teaching techniques, we can position our students to make substantial learning improvements. Included below are six reform initiatives aimed at placing the best possible teachers in our classrooms.

Teacher initiatives	Cost to implement		Impact on student achievement
	Per impacted student (\$/year)	Region-wide (\$ MM/year)	
1. Reform the state tenure system to enhance teacher accountability and quality	20-50	2-5	High
2. Adopt a market-based strategy for teacher compensation	110-190	12-20	Med-High
3. Provide teachers with ongoing, relevant knowledge-sharing and professional development opportunities	20-40	2-4	Med
4. Implement merit pay for teachers	15-70	2-8	Med
5. Strengthen teacher induction and retention programs	30-60	3-6	Low-Med
6. Recruit new teachers through alternative certification programs	5-10	<1	Low

### Teachers (1): Reform the state tenure system to enhance teacher accountability and quality

Teachers—like students, schools, and other professionals—should be held accountable for their performance. Once their certification and employment have been established, however, teachers in Louisiana are subject to little oversight beyond an annual checklist and are almost never dismissed for poor performance due to a time-consuming, bureaucratic process. As such, despite the many dedicated teaching professionals in public schools throughout our region, there are unfortunately many other teachers who continuously fail to advance student achievement. Experts note that less than one percent of public or private school teachers who changed schools cite being dismissed or transferred as the reason. In this context, research suggests that regular performance monitoring and dismissal of the most ineffective teachers would enhance student achievement by as much as 14 percentile points, increasing economic value from \$72,000 to \$169,000 per high school graduate.

The current laws and the political climate in Louisiana make reform of teacher tenure laws very difficult. School boards can dismiss teachers within their first three years without a hearing based on a recommendation from the superintendent, though relatively few ineffective teachers are dismissed even at this “probationary” period due to poor evaluation systems and expectations that are largely disconnected from student achievement. Following their “probationary” period, teachers become “regular” and

“permanent” employees of their school system (i.e., achieve tenure), thereby requiring documented grounds for discharge based on willful neglect of duty, incompetence, dishonesty, or membership or contribution to an unlawful organization. Education leaders at all levels—principals, superintendents, and school boards—frequently avoid this constitutionally mandated “due process” often preferring to transfer, marginalize, or suspend ineffective teachers rather than engage in months or years of documentation, hearings, and appeals. Almost universally, superintendents across the Baton Rouge area describe the process to dismiss teachers as “nearly impossible.”

Reforming tenure law could take several approaches, as previously proposed by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (PAR), all with relatively little financial cost and implemented on a go-forward basis. Teachers who have already achieved tenure would be protected according to the current laws. First, a revised law could end the practice of nearly automatic tenure by outlining minimum standards for performance that encourage a more meaningful, impact-oriented tenure system. Like professionals in other sectors, teachers would be given annual goals and objectives; only those teachers meeting performance expectations would become tenured. Second, to encourage thorough evaluations that reflect the most important performance indicators, the state could link tenure qualifications with a teacher’s impact on student achievement. Additionally, principals could evaluate their teachers according to a standard ranking distribution in order to identify the highest and lowest performers. Research suggests that principals can distinguish the least and most effective teachers with a remarkable degree of accuracy. Third, the state should consider extending the probationary period from three to five years, granting districts additional time to monitor teacher performance and provide professional development and remediation as needed. Fourth, the language outlining the grounds for discharge could be adjusted to reflect a more clearly defined standard, including changing “incompetence” to “less than adequate performance.” Finally, the hearing to determine dismissal could be held by an independent authority—perhaps an administrative law judge—instead of school board members to eliminate the reluctance of elected officials to appear harsh with the teacher constituency. An independent authority may increase the number of cases that principals and superintendents are willing to bring forward, as there would be a greater likelihood for a hearing to be held and action to be taken. In sum, integrating greater accountability into the current tenure system could professionalize our public education hiring and promotion systems, provide our students with more motivated and capable classroom leaders, and enhance overall student achievement.

### **Teachers (2): Adopt a market-based strategy for teacher compensation**

The ability to recruit and retain qualified teaching professionals hinges, in part, on the capacity of school districts to offer a comparable level of compensation with neighboring districts, plus the ability to attract talented individuals considering other professions. Although teacher salaries in the Baton Rouge area as a whole are comparable to those in most peer regions, significant variation in salary levels across districts within the Capital Region—particularly starting salaries—produces wide disparities in the competition for teaching talent (see Part 3 for more information on teacher salaries). Additionally, most of our districts have great difficulties hiring and maintaining math and

science teachers for high-poverty schools. Districts should consider moving toward teacher salary structures that reflect market conditions—potentially offering higher compensation to entry- and early-level teachers, special education teachers, teachers in hard-to-find disciplines, and teachers willing to serve in the most challenging school environments. Ascension’s \$1,000+ incentive program for teachers in high-poverty schools offers an example of market-driven compensation being used in the Baton Rouge area. A more comprehensive market-based compensation system may help in attracting qualified teachers throughout our region.

### **Teachers (3): Provide teachers with ongoing, relevant knowledge-sharing and professional development opportunities**

In the classroom setting, teachers are often relatively isolated from their peers, thereby hindered in their ability to learn “best practices” while on the job. Investments in well-structured knowledge-sharing and professional development activities for teachers can enhance their effectiveness on a continuous basis, including their ability to advance student achievement. There are numerous professional development seminars and presentations currently offered to teachers in the Baton Rouge area; however, these programs are often not tailored to the specific skill sets and experiences of teachers and are unable to address real, current challenges in a consistent manner. Several initiatives in the Baton Rouge area are moving toward a more comprehensive, relevant approach (e.g., Livingston and St. Helena partnerships with Southeastern Louisiana University). Our districts should consider establishing broader, ongoing knowledge-sharing and professional development programs for their teachers to ensure that they are well equipped to advance student achievement in the classroom.

### **Teachers (4): Implement merit pay for teachers**

Research shows that across-the-board teacher pay raises do not recognize the quality of work since they reward all teachers similarly without regard to difficulty of assignment, professional role, or quality of performance. Rewarding teachers for improvements in student achievement may encourage effective teachers to remain committed to their most important goal. With the increased focus on accountability and student achievement in recent years, school districts across the country are increasingly adopting “pay-for-performance” incentive plans. In the Baton Rouge area, teachers in Iberville have received a financial bonus for meeting or exceeding a pre-determined annual growth target for student achievement. East Baton Rouge has piloted an incentive system in its reconstituted schools and is considering an expansion to other schools, perhaps as a team-based incentive. Our area’s school systems should consider comprehensive merit-pay compensation structures for teachers that take into account measurable increases in student achievement results and structured evaluations by principals and peers.

### **Teachers (5): Strengthen teacher induction and retention programs**

Throughout Louisiana, one in four teachers leaves the public school system in their first five years and, unfortunately, our region loses many of its young, promising teachers. To attack the issue, our state has established initiatives such as the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LaTAAP) and Louisiana FIRST. The state

programs not only help with employee retention, but—through summer induction, ongoing professional development, online and in-person support and mentoring, and the sharing of models and best practices—prepare young teachers to excel in their field. In our region, Ascension has designated skilled “teacher coaches” that are free of normal teaching requirements and work almost exclusively with their colleagues—both new and experienced—to heighten morale and share innovative teaching methods. Baton Rouge area school districts should consider aggressively implementing comprehensive induction programs, in coordination with existing state initiatives, that employ creative means to encourage our young teachers to remain in public education and to improve their teaching abilities.

**Teachers (6): Recruit new teachers through alternative certification programs**

Teacher certification requirements promote competence and skills among education professionals. However, rigidly designed certification requirements also discourage some talented professionals, particularly college graduates without education degrees, from pursuing the teaching profession. As such, alternative certification initiatives such as the Practitioner Teacher Program are important to recruiting otherwise qualified individuals into the profession. Given their potential to bring diversely talented and experienced individuals into the teaching ranks, programs like these should be supported and expanded as necessary.

## Principals

Key stakeholders in public education widely recognize the profound importance of principals to effective schools. Numerous case examples highlight the ability of outstanding principals to reverse the course of under-performing schools by setting the proper tone, making difficult decisions, and demanding high levels of performance from teachers and staff. Listed below are five critical initiatives to attract and develop outstanding school administrators—the type of leaders required to overcome the challenges facing Baton Rouge area schools.

Principal initiatives	Cost to implement		Impact on student achievement
	Per impacted student (\$/year)	Region-wide (\$ MM/year)	
1. Create a “principal pipeline” of exceptional school leaders	5-25	1-3	High
2. Aggressively remove ineffective principals from the principal role	2-5	<1	Med-High
3. Establish market-based principal compensation	20-50	2-5	Med-High
4. Expand the autonomy of principals	<1	<1	Med
5. Implement merit pay for principals	1-6	<1	Med

### Principals (1): Create a “principal pipeline” of exceptional school leaders

Across the board, district administrators, teachers, and education experts state that principals are key to effective schools. Yet their working conditions are difficult, their training is frequently neglected, and they operate in isolation from their peers. In addition, there is little financial incentive for teachers and education leaders to become principals as their daily wage barely equals that of teachers. For these reasons, many potential candidates are discouraged from becoming school principals.

Principal recruitment and development has received increased attention both statewide and locally in recent years. State initiatives include the Louisiana Educational Leaders Network, the Louisiana Leadership Excellence through Administrator Development (LaLEAD) program, and the Louisiana Principal Academy that offer recruitment, professional development, induction, and ongoing support programs for school leaders. In addition, many Baton Rouge area districts (including Ascension, Iberville, and West Baton Rouge) have implemented their own principal development programs.

Given that exceptionally talented principals can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of education in their schools, districts in the Baton Rouge area should consider making larger, more comprehensive investments in principal recruitment and development. The additional support could greatly enhance the performance of traditional efforts such as expanded district-university principal development programs and more clearly defined leadership tracks for interested, qualified principal candidates.

In addition, districts should consider searching beyond their boundaries to find outstanding school leaders. Experts note that many of today's principal applicants do not have the qualifications needed to execute challenging school improvement strategies. Research shows that, in principal hiring decisions, local experience tends to be equated with quality, and aging former teachers with the appropriate licensures are typically favored over other candidates. To address this issue, the state should consider easing the rigid requirements for licensure and teaching experience that currently discourage the entry of high-potential, non-traditional leaders from outside the education sector. To increase the "pipeline" of principal applicants from non-traditional backgrounds, professionals must be made aware of and have access to alternative certification programs, similar to those for teaching positions. Experts suggest developing a Licensing-Plus program, whereby the experience of potential principals is evaluated with a rigorous assessment of knowledge and skills relevant to school improvement, rather than years in the classroom.

One successful example of non-traditional principal development is the New Leaders for New Schools program, which operates in several cities across the country in partnership with universities and districts to recruit, train, and mentor educators and former educators with the potential to become highly effective urban school principals. By focusing energy and resources on developing outstanding principals—perhaps through innovative programs such as New Leaders for New Schools—our region could increase its capacity to dramatically improve student achievement in many of our most challenging schools.

### **Principals (2): Aggressively remove ineffective principals from the principal role**

Experts and practitioners frequently cite school principals as the most important drivers of student achievement because of the central role they play in the day-to-day school management. Unlike tenured teachers, who are extremely difficult to dismiss even for poor performance, removing principals is an administrative matter that generally does not even require a hearing. Yet too often poorly performing principals are allowed to continue leading our schools despite the potential for a more effective leader to step into the role. School boards should hold superintendents accountable for removing principals who are not effective education leaders in their schools. As many have noted, there are few bad schools with good principals.

### **Principals (3): Establish market-based principal compensation**

There are few incentives for teachers and other professionals to become principals, as the daily wage of school leaders often barely equals that of teachers. To encourage the most promising individuals to become school principals, systems should consider adopting market-based compensation that increases current principal pay levels by as much as \$10,000 to \$25,000 per year.

### **Principals (4): Expand the autonomy of principals**

Research indicates school performance can be improved when principals are responsible for key activities such as recruitment and development of teachers, curricular issues, and the design and implementation of standard school-level functions

and policies. In our region, when a new principal began at Prescott Middle in East Baton Rouge in 2001 as a result of a state-mandated reorganization, he worked with district leaders to establish a new administrative team, transfer poor teachers out, and hire 25 new certified teachers. These efforts helped lead to large increases in test scores the very next year. Today, across the Baton Rouge area, principals have limited control or authority over their schools, classrooms, policies, and many practical decisions impacting their operations and effectiveness. Districts should consider ways to further empower principals to make those school-level decisions that impact student achievement and avoid mandating school-level policy at the district level.

**Principals (5): Implement merit pay for principals**

Principals currently do not receive substantial financial rewards for outstanding performance despite their mission-critical role in the success of an entire school. Implementing a merit pay system focused on the major responsibilities of principals (e.g., recruiting and retaining outstanding teachers, improving parental engagement) could play a significant role in enhancing principal performance and developing leaders focused on student achievement.

## Administrators

District leaders set many of the strategies, policies, and priorities that define a student’s educational experience. Committed, ambitious administrators—willing to challenge existing assumptions and support new opportunities to advance student achievement—can initiate fresh and exciting learning environments for students in the Capital Region. By implementing one or more of the following initiatives, school systems in our area can create an atmosphere that cultivates academic excellence.

<b>Administrators initiatives</b>	<b>Cost to implement</b>		<b>Impact on student achievement</b>
	Per impacted student (\$/year)	Region-wide (\$ MM/year)	
1. Maintain and improve school facilities	700-1,100	80-120	Med-High
2. Implement financial management and allocation best practices	N/A	N/A	Med
3. Accelerate interventions in failing schools	15-25	2-3	Low-Med
4. Expand formation of autonomous schools	2,500-5,000	8-16	Low-Med
5. Explore alternative governance models	5-25	0-3	Uncertain

### Administrators (1): Maintain and improve school facilities

Research shows that higher achievement is associated with newer school buildings, as is improved health and attendance. The quality of school facilities has also been linked with improved student behavior and more positive attitudes, behavior, and relationships among teachers and students in general. In Louisiana, unlike many other states, individual school districts bear the primary burden of financing school facilities. As a result, many facilities in our region are in poor condition and require substantial investment (~\$600 million in East Baton Rouge alone) to meet official standards. Even though some area districts have passed local taxes for school facilities, districts should consider seeking additional state funds, reprioritizing spending, or approaching voters for additional local taxes to upgrade and better maintain facilities.

### Administrators (2): Implement financial management and allocation best practices

Research demonstrates that effective, targeted allocation of the public’s investment in education can have a strong impact on student achievement. Efficiency gains can free substantial resources for instruction and programs that are proven to advance student achievement. Districts in our region should consider investigating and implementing best-practice resource allocation principles to devote a larger percentage of their total resources to instructional expenditures, as our region generally lags its peers on this measure. In particular, East Baton Rouge may consider reviewing its expenditures on non-administrative support functions (e.g., maintenance, transportation, food services) given its relatively large allocation (27 percent of total resources) vs. urban districts in peer regions (see Part 3 for more information on Baton Rouge area per pupil expenditures).

**Administrators (3): Accelerate interventions in failing schools**

In situations where a school continuously fails to advance student achievement, district leaders and principals should be empowered to take early, decisive action to improve school performance *in advance* of a state takeover. Across the board, governing rules are relaxed for school reorganization efforts, and the principal is allowed to recruit new teachers and enact a variety of aggressive new policies. As discussed under the Principal Autonomy initiative (see above), the Baton Rouge area has seen examples where a strong, empowered principal was able to dramatically improve student achievement in a failing school. In addition, partnerships with higher education and non-profit organizations are often formed to provide targeted support, and these efforts frequently lead to notable improvements. Districts should consider making policy adjustments such that aggressive school reorganization efforts can occur *before* a school has completely failed its students and fallen under state control.

**Administrators (4): Expand formation of autonomous schools**

Many students, particularly at-risk children, have specific needs that may be difficult to adequately address in traditional school environments. Autonomous schools—so called for their greater operational and programmatic autonomy—represent an innovative model for addressing the particular needs of these students, with ambitious achievement targets established in a contract with the school board. In New York City, a newly created “autonomy zone” of over 50 small schools reports better attendance and initial academic improvements among participating students. With support from the Gates Foundation and guidance by Advance Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge is currently implementing plans for three autonomous schools to begin operating in the 2007-08 academic year, including schools tailored to address the needs of at-risk middle school students and/or overage middle and high school students. These current initiatives will depend on sustained support from Advance Baton Rouge and other stakeholders. If initial results are promising, additional autonomous schools should be considered in East Baton Rouge and other districts in our region.

**Administrators (5): Explore alternative governance models**

The interest, welfare, and opportunities for academic achievement of Baton Rouge area students should transcend political interests among elected officials and district administrators. While there continues to be national debate regarding the impact of district size on student achievement, many researchers and school reformers argue that smaller districts, where school boards oversee only one to five schools, represent a better approach for improving student achievement. For instance, the Recovery School District in New Orleans aggressively sought out multiple charter school operators—in essence, creating multiple governing authorities, each in charge of a small number of schools. The existing school districts in the Baton Rouge area should be open to evaluating alternative models for public education, including smaller, locally governed school districts. In addition, districts may consider options to more equitably share financial burdens between new and legacy school districts when new districts form.

## Conclusion

The profound importance of pursuing initiatives to increase student achievement is clear throughout the Capital Region. Across our metropolitan area, 40 percent of public school students currently fail to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Even in our top-ranked districts, approximately 25 percent of children cannot read, write, and do math at a basic level. Furthermore, public school districts in the Baton Rouge area as a whole generally compare poorly with their peers in the southern U.S. and across the nation on broad measures of student achievement.

Access to high-quality public education is an indicator of and contributor to a productive and developed society. Given its profound impact on the health of our community and economy, BRAC's regional economic development strategy includes advancing public education as a fundamental goal, expressed as the regional Learning Community initiative—positioning the Capital Region as a place where formal and informal education are widely embraced, where workers seek and prepare for knowledge-based jobs, and where lifelong learning is a common pursuit of our culture.

Realizing this vision takes more than good ideas and a strong vision; it will require sustained commitment on actionable initiatives, including many of those described here. This process begins with leaders in business, education, government, and the nonprofit sector working in partnership with area citizens to support effective, comprehensive approaches for improving student achievement.

Our region most likely cannot afford to implement all of the initiatives described above. Therefore, leaders in each school district will have to prioritize those initiatives that offer the greatest impact at the lowest cost while simultaneously identifying efficiency measures to free up more resources for instructional initiatives. A targeted approach will generate large increases in student achievement while softening the fiscal blow to taxpayers.

Throughout the Baton Rouge area, there are thousands of people—parents, teachers, administrators, volunteers, and school board members—dedicated to improving student achievement and the overall quality of public schools. This is evidenced by the fact that every school district in the region has improved its performance since the state accountability system was implemented eight years ago. However, with 40 percent of students failing to demonstrate basic skills in key subject areas, there is clearly much more work to be done. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are in continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge area.



This installment concludes BRAC's five-part research series on public education in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area. BRAC will employ the findings of this research series in shaping its strategy for improving public education and advancing a regional Learning

Community initiative. In particular, BRAC plans to actively pursue a small subset of the initiatives identified in this research, convene groups of key stakeholders, monitor implementation of relevant initiatives, and maintain a sustained commitment to improving student achievement throughout the Capital Region.