

STRATEGY PAPER 

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Connecting Learning with Economic Growth:
Supporting Legislative Action to Improve Public Education

Executive Summary: *Quality public education is a cornerstone to sustained economic growth and a quality workforce. The purpose of this strategy paper is to highlight the relevance of several pieces of current legislation to public education reform priorities held by the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC). To improve student achievement, BRAC supports initiatives to (i) expand quality early childhood education and the state’s LA 4 program for at-risk students; (ii) provide incentives to maintain and attract highly-trained, effective teachers; (iii) establish programs to keep children enrolled in school; (iv) maintain, expand, and fund high-quality alternative learning environments; and (v) ensure that a strong accountability system remains in place to monitor and measure results. 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 in the Capital Region. The 2008 regular session offers the Legislature an opportunity to invest in and support these efforts.*

Education Reform: New Solutions for Long-standing Challenges

The quality of a region’s public education system is a key factor for economic development; people want to live, and businesses want to locate, in areas where their children can benefit from excellent public schools. Yet with 40 percent of the Capital Region’s public school students failing to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, these districts as a whole compare poorly with their peers in the South and across the nation. Not only does poor student performance limit opportunity for the area’s youth, it also serves as a significant hurdle for business recruitment and retention efforts statewide—a recent survey of national business leaders found that improving its public schools was the #1 thing Louisiana could do to attract more business. A quality public education system is vital to the prosperity of the region; everyone in the community—even those individuals and families not directly involved in the system—should demand excellence and accountability.

Compared with similar regions, Baton Rouge area public schools have one of the largest proportions of “at-risk” students, defined as those receiving free or reduced-fare lunch, at 61 percent (with highs of 88 percent and 84 percent in St. Helena and East Feliciana Parishes, respectively). Across the country, students from low-income 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, and adequate school supplies).

Old methods and strategies have been ineffective in closing the achievement gaps and increasing students' academic performance. For these reasons, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC), as part of *The Campaign for a Greater Baton Rouge*, undertook a five-part research series, *Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area: An Agenda for Reform*. The series provides an in-depth look at the perceptions and realities of the public K-12 school systems in the Baton Rouge area and is the first ever comprehensive regional study of the school districts in the Capital Region. The series culminates with a summary of potential reforms to improve student achievement and school performance in our regional community. (*The full report can be found online at www.brac.org/public_education.*)

There have been well over 100 pieces of education-related legislation proposed during this year's regular session. Based upon reform priorities outlined in the research series as well as its 2008 annual agenda, BRAC has identified several targeted strategies for improving student achievement and will support or oppose legislation based upon its alignment with these priorities:

- Expand quality early childhood education and the state's *LA 4* program for at-risk students
- Provide incentives to maintain and attract highly-trained, effective teachers
- Establish programs to keep children enrolled in school
- Maintain, expand, and fund high-quality alternative learning environments
- Ensure a strong accountability system remains in place to monitor and measure results

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. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are in continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Capital Region.

Based upon these priorities, BRAC supports HBs 321, 349, 463, 626, 655, 718, 722, 725, 813, 1105, 1037, and 1091, as well as HCR 44 and SBs 127, 170, 286, and 582—but opposes HBs 397 and 676.

BRAC Priorities for 2008 Regular Session:

1. Expand quality early childhood education and the state's LA 4 program for at-risk students

Research demonstrates that three and four-year old children who participate in high quality, academically rigorous early childhood programs have higher scores on math and reading tests, greater language abilities, and higher graduation rates. HB 722 and SB 286 seek to increase access to these programs for all Louisianans by expanding the LA 4 program, providing for phased-in universal access as well as allowing non-school system providers to participate in the system.

In its original form, HB 1 set aside an additional \$2.5 million for pre-kindergarten education—however the House stripped this allocation from the budget. BRAC strongly urges the Senate to restore and protect funding for these critical efforts; quality early education programs give Louisiana's children a better chance for future success, and their support must be considered a top priority.

2. Provide incentives to maintain and attract highly-trained, effective teachers

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. The state and local school systems should continue to increase teacher pay to maintain wages competitive with Southern Regional Education Board average, only recently attained through state funding increases. In doing so, however, BRAC analysis indicates that a more comprehensive market-based compensation system may help in attracting and maintaining qualified teachers throughout our region. HB 1037 will provide salary differentials for teachers with certain advanced degrees. BRAC has long supported districts 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.

One organization that has been particularly effective at recruiting teachers for particularly challenging environments is *Teach for America*. Though the program requested \$2.5 million, HB 1 only includes \$500,000 of support for the two divisions operating in Louisiana. This nationally-recognized program recruits and trains outstanding recent college graduates to teach in high-poverty urban and rural public schools and deserves additional money. The South Louisiana program, which

operates in three parishes in the Capital Region, has impacted more than 85,000 students since its inception in 1990. The money will fund additional teachers and will be matched heavily through private fundraising.

3. Establish programs to keep children enrolled in school

Louisiana has one of the highest drop-out rates in the South—currently, any 17 or 18 year-old student may withdraw from school with parental consent. HB 1091 creates a dropout prevention and recovery program known as the "Louisiana School Dropout Prevention Act of 2008." The program is aimed at keeping children in school and requires the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to utilize dropout prevention strategies, target resources, and gather data to improve graduation rates and educational outcomes in all grades in all schools.

4. Maintain, expand, and fund high-quality alternative learning environments

Families with children in failing schools need options and support; in Louisiana, charter schools represent one of the most widely available alternatives for parents. Simultaneously, schools in the Recovery School District (RSD) also need support and should be provided with the resources—as well as the time—necessary to turn things around. Recent test score increases in New Orleans-area RSD schools are promising; the improvements indicate that given these resources, increases in student achievement are possible.

Charter School Support

Charter schools are independent public schools. While they are held to state accountability standards, they are not subject to many state and federal regulations that apply to traditional public schools; allowing charter schools this degree of flexibility has made them particularly effective in working with at-risk student populations. HB 655 protects the independence of charter schools by prohibiting local school boards from entering into collective bargaining agreements that bind charter school governing authorities or limit their discretion.

Charter School Types

- Type 1:* Charter with local school board (new start-up)
- Type 2:* Charter with BESE (new start-up or conversion)
- Type 3:* Charter with local school board (conversion)
- Type 4:* School board charter with BESE (new start-up or conversion)
- Type 5:* Charter with BESE (pre-existing public school under RSD jurisdiction)

Source: Louisiana Department of Education

Charter schools can be strong assets to a learning community—HB 321 gives local school boards increased freedom to issue charters, under specified conditions, to benefit learning in their respective districts. Currently, the number of charter school proposals allowed during a chartering period is capped at 42 statewide—as amended, the bill will increase this number to 70. On a related issue, HB 349 and SBs 127 and 170 will change the charter school renewal period from 10-year periods to periods of up to 10 years, allowing for increased accountability.

For charter schools to be most effective, they must have an adequate and reliable source of funding. While Type 1, 3, 4, and 5 charter schools receive funding from the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) flowing through local school boards or the RSD, Type 2 charter schools receive funding from a general fund appropriation flowing through the state Department of Education and BESE. HB 813 is a Constitutional amendment that will require BESE to include Type 2 schools in the MFP formula annually developed and adopted by the board and submitted for legislative approval. Similarly, HCR 44 requests BESE, beginning with the MFP formula adopted for the 2009-2010 school year and thereafter, to include these charter schools in the formula for funding purposes. These instruments will ensure that all charter schools are adequately and consistently funded.

To ensure that students attending public charter schools benefit from this funding, the financial dealings between charter schools and chartering authorities must be equitable and transparent. HBs 626 and 1105 remove a provision authorizing certain charter schools to accept lesser per pupil amounts in exchange for certain services; authorize certain fees by chartering authorities relative to administrative overhead costs, capping this amount at 2% of the total per pupil amount received by the charter school; and provide for charter schools to contract with chartering authorities for services not included in overhead costs, such as food service and transportation service. The legislation will additionally require a detailed accounting of money passed between chartering authorities and charter schools.

Lastly, alternative learning environments cannot succeed without the efforts of hard-working, dedicated teachers, administrators, and staff. HBs 718 and 725 extend the allowable length of time a school board shall grant a school employee a leave of absence in order to be employed in a charter school. Present law allows school boards to grant leaves of up to three years—the legislation will increase this period to no more than five years. The extension allows employees increased freedom to explore different learning environments as a way to understand how and where they can be most effective.

Recovery School District Support

The RSD provides an opportunity for the state to gain support for the development of a strong infrastructure for the improvement of public schools. Once reforms have been well established and student achievement has increased, these schools can be returned to the local community.

HB 463 requires that schools transferred to the RSD shall remain there for not less than five years. The bill additionally sets up a new reporting and recommendation procedure for the RSD and BESE to determine whether to retain the school, close the school, or return the school back to the transferring authority upon the expiration of the transfer period. Requiring failing schools to stay in the RSD for a longer period will allow stakeholders the necessary time to study, implement, and evaluate reform efforts; research cited by the Louisiana Department of Education indicates that it takes about 5 years to turn around a failing school.

In addition to protecting the independence of charter schools, HB 655 also provides circumstances under which a failing Type 4 charter school may be operated as a Type 5 school and transferred into the RSD. When needed, students in every type of public learning environment should be able to benefit from RSD resources.

5. Ensure a strong accountability system is in place to monitor and measure results

Louisiana's award-winning public school accountability plan is a central component in efforts to increase student achievement across the state. By identifying low-performing students and schools, the accountability system will inform instruction and strategies that lead to increases in student achievement, educational attainment, and long-term economic growth in our state and region, particularly when these measures are used for the early detection of problems. SB 582 will require the state Department of Education to establish a program to identify low-performing schools at risk of being labeled "academically unacceptable" and provide targeted interventions to address areas of weakness and prevent the school from failing.

Louisiana's accountability plan includes high-stakes standardized tests that evaluate the ability of students to demonstrate skills in key subject areas. BRAC supports accountability and therefore opposes HBs 397 and 676, which strip the central incentive needed to ensure the relevance of these tests and the accountability system generally. There is no point in creating an accountability system and then passing laws to circumvent it.

Conclusion

The Capital Region faces real challenges that are difficult to overcome. Closing the achievement gap has proven difficult nationally, and communities across the country struggle with similar issues. What we have been doing to this point has only produced moderate success; it is time to try something different. As a community, we must stand together to support the region's public education system—not only to strengthen economic development and develop a strong workforce, but to give our children the opportunities they deserve.