


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)



Baton Rouge Area Chamber

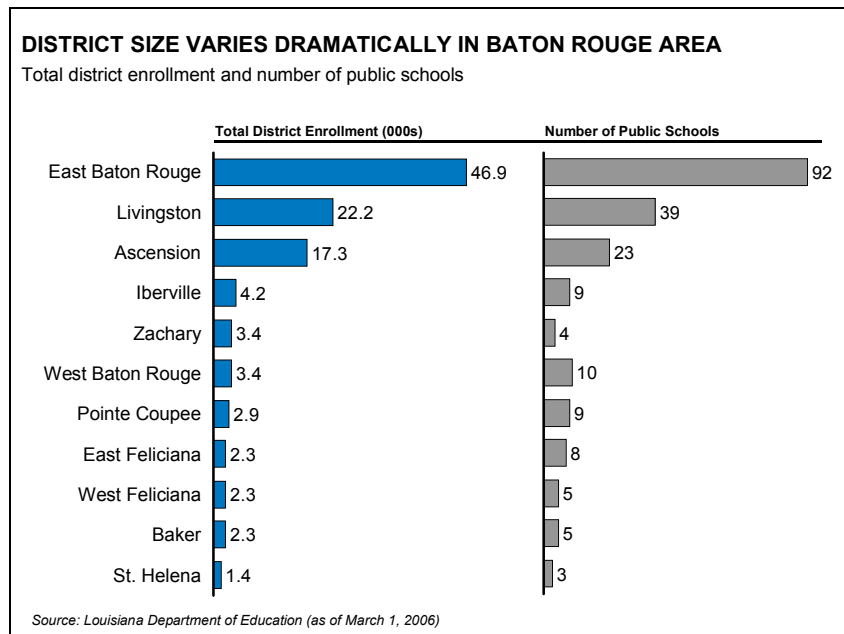
On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their public school districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) has initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in 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.

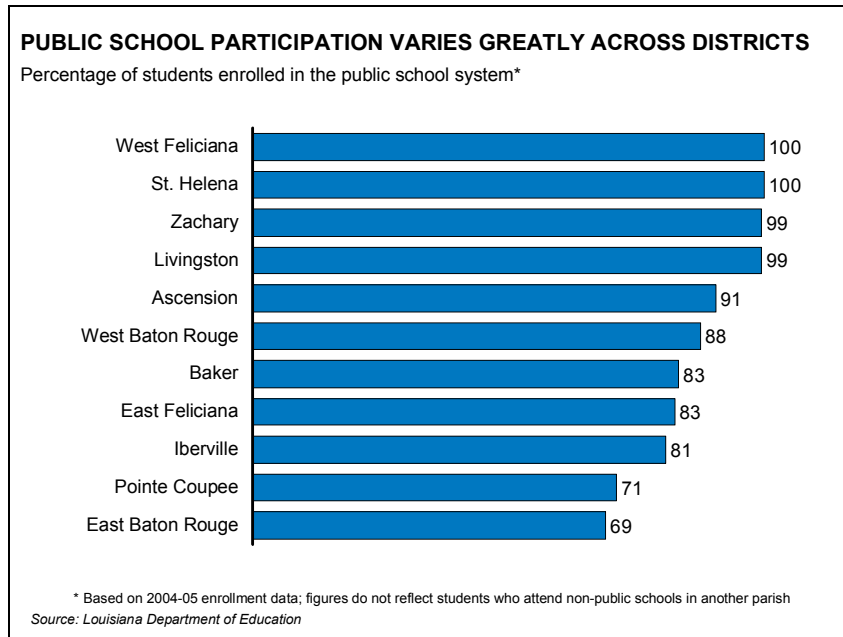
Public Education in the Baton Rouge Area

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.

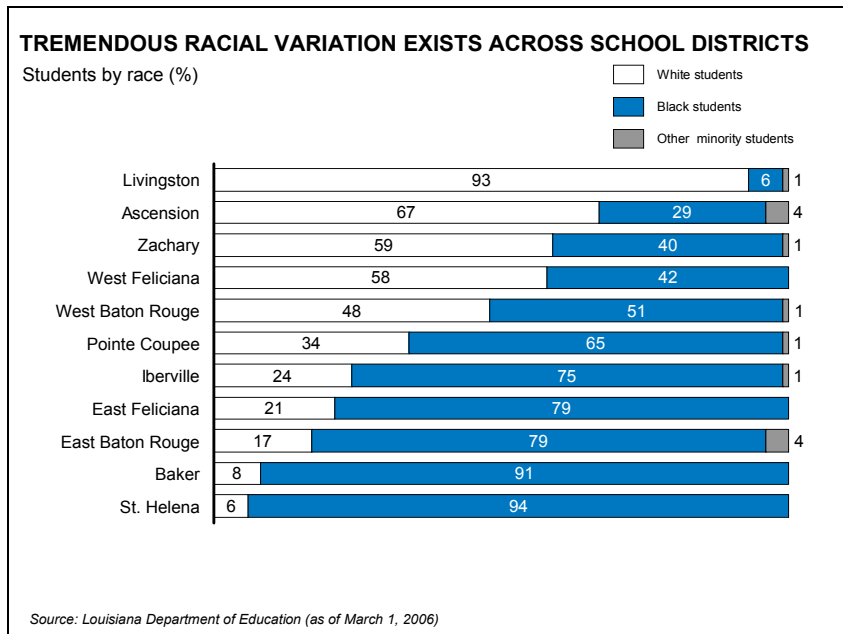
The school districts differ significantly along a number of dimensions. For example, East Baton Rouge is by far the largest school district in the area, serving nearly 47,000 students, while enrollment in St. Helena is less than 1,400.



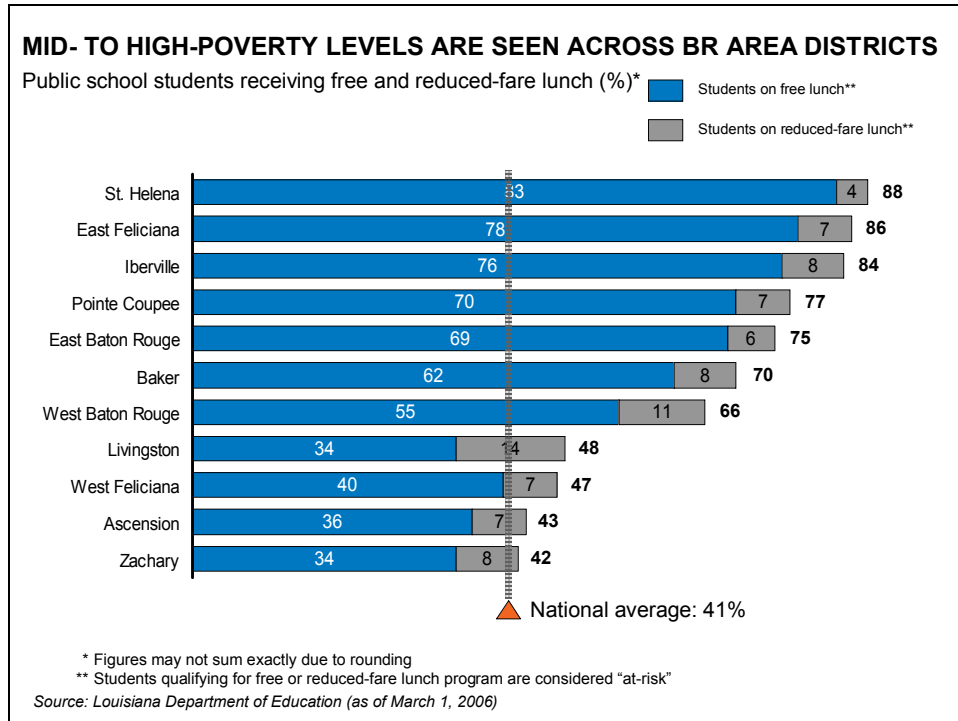
In several school districts all students attend public schools, while nearly one-third of all students in East Baton Rouge attend nonpublic schools, based on pre-Katrina figures. In some parishes, there are no private schools, while other areas have an extensive network of nonpublic schools. Some students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

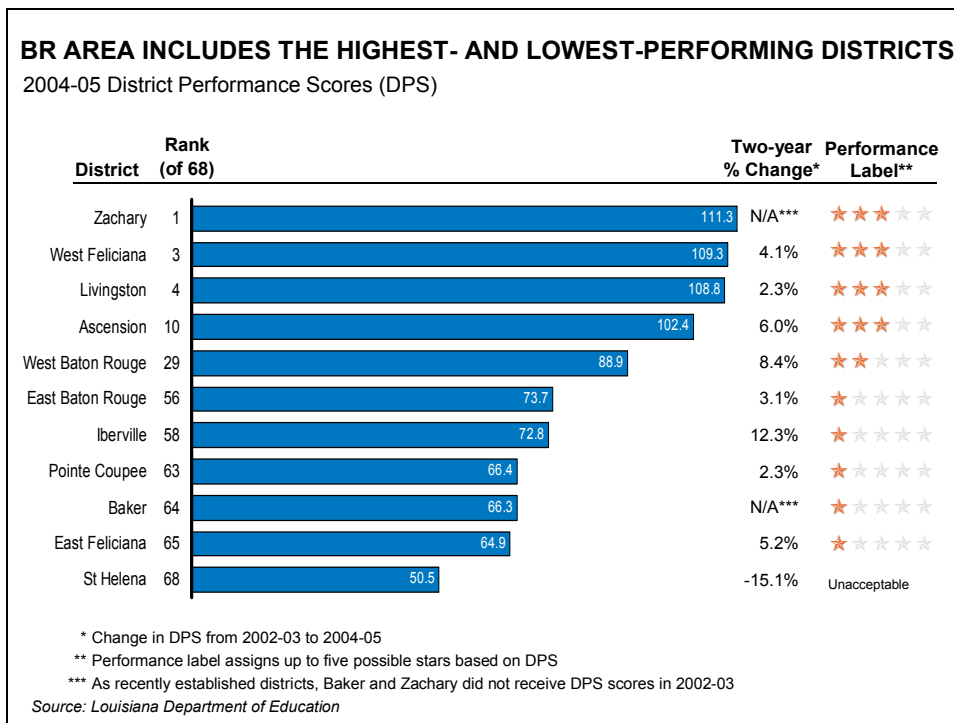
- Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP) – 4th and 8th grades
- Graduation Exit Examination for the 21st Century (GEE) – 10th and 11th grades
- Iowa tests – 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 9th grades

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.

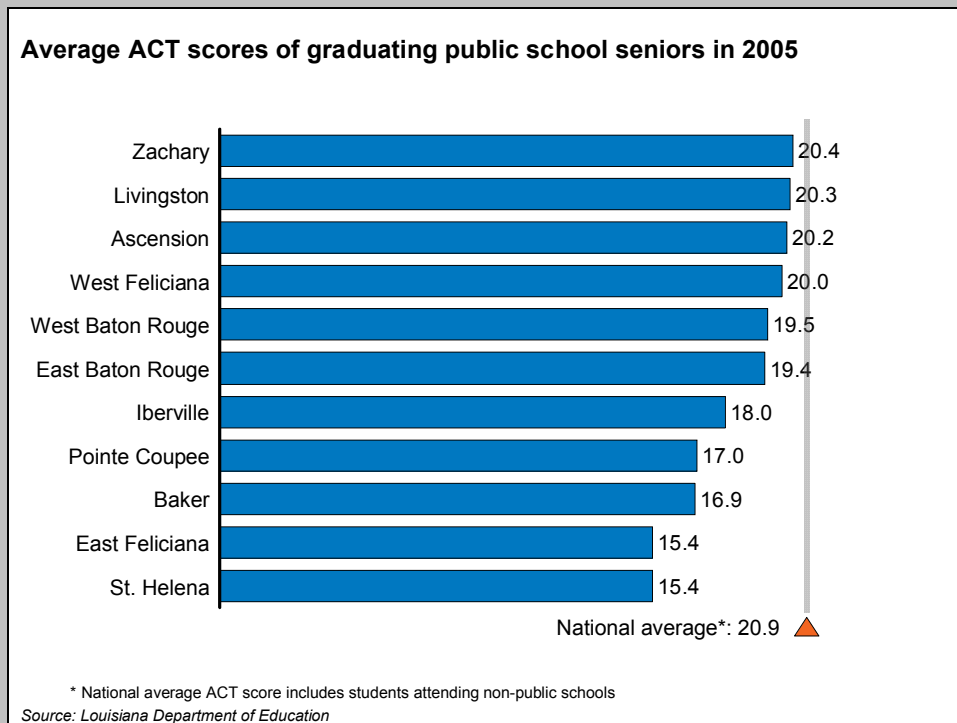
DPS is a useful tool to compare school districts across Louisiana. It tells us how students are faring on standardized tests from year to year and how this relates to other students, schools, and districts across the state. However, there are a variety of other performance indicators that the DPS does 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.

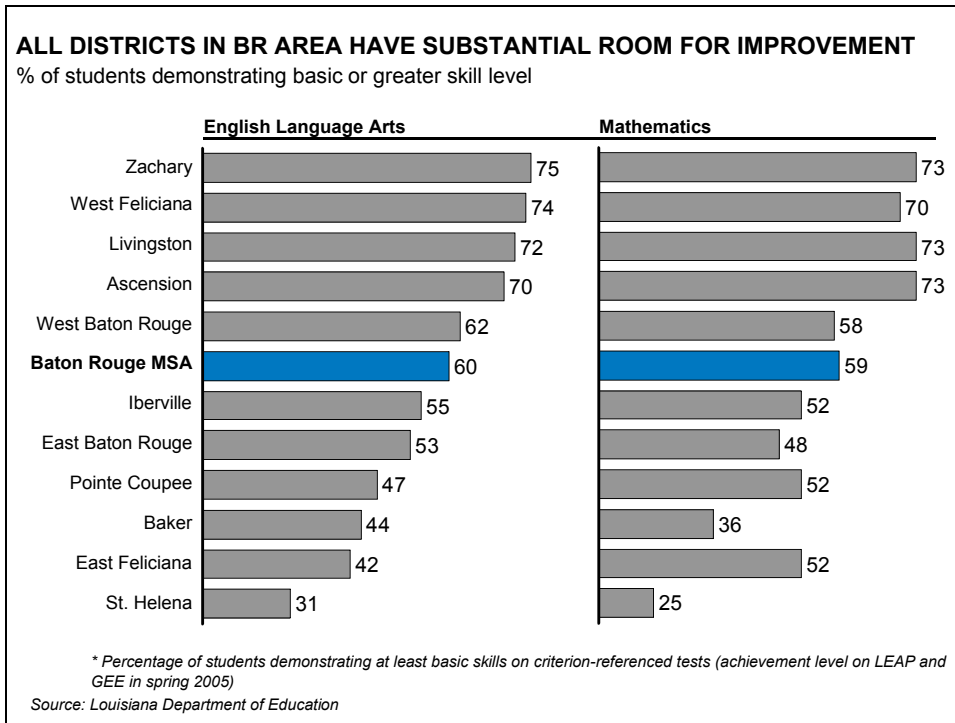
2005 ACT Scores in the Baton Rouge Area

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.



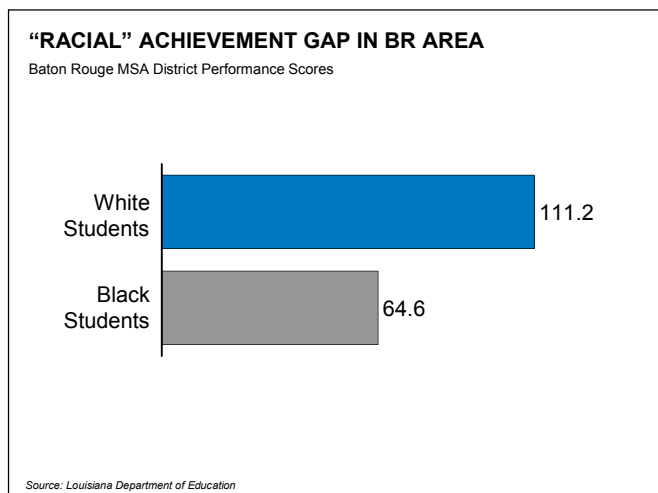
Finally, while the DPS system is useful for evaluating relative performance, it does not provide a clear measure of student learning in absolute terms. Nevertheless, the criterion-referenced tests that constitute a major portion of DPS—namely LEAP and GEE—actually measure the degree to which students 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.

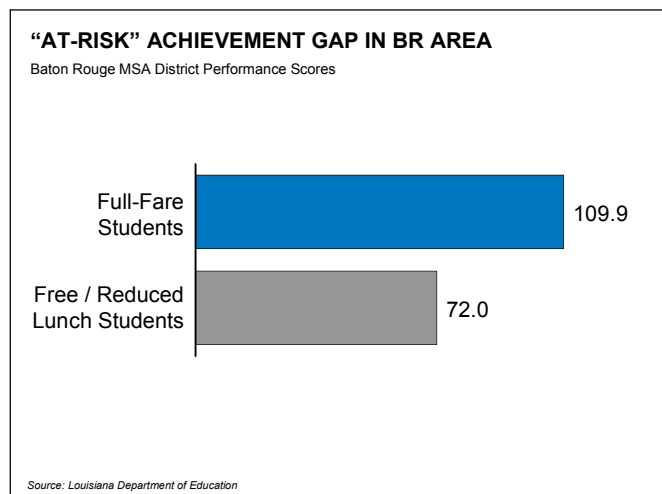
Across the country, black students historically attain lower scores on state and national tests than their white counterparts. Although minority students in the United States made significant advancements from the 1970s to the 1990s, the “racial achievement gap” continues to pose a major obstacle to 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.

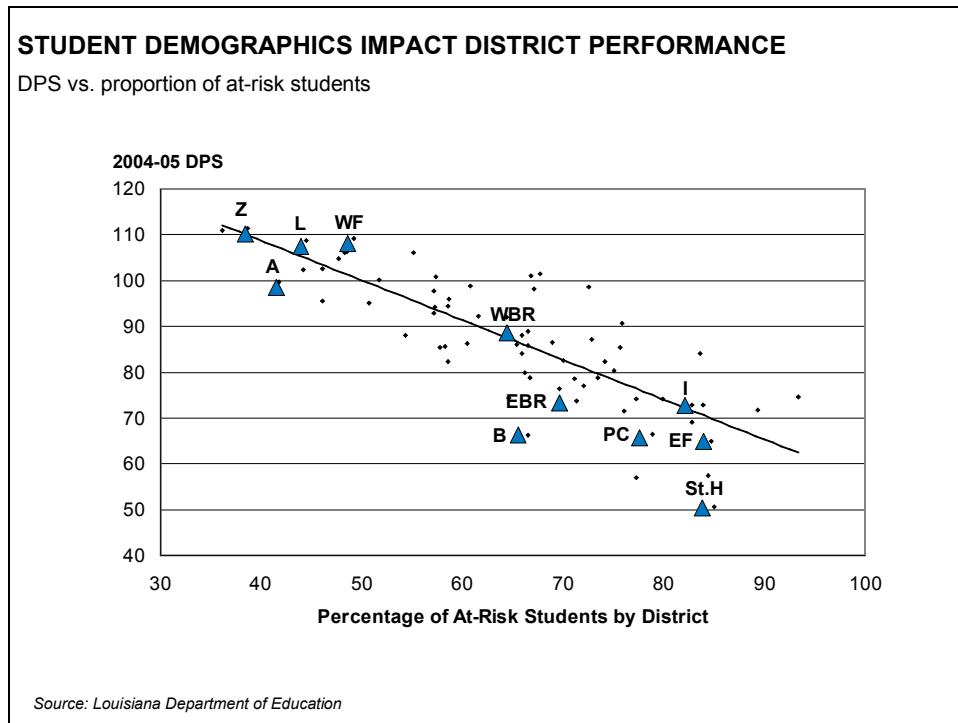


This does not imply that students from low-income households cannot learn as well as others or that society should have lower expectations for them. It does, however, recognize the advantages of students from middle- and upper-income families (e.g., parents with a college education, internet service 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 (56th 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.