

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)

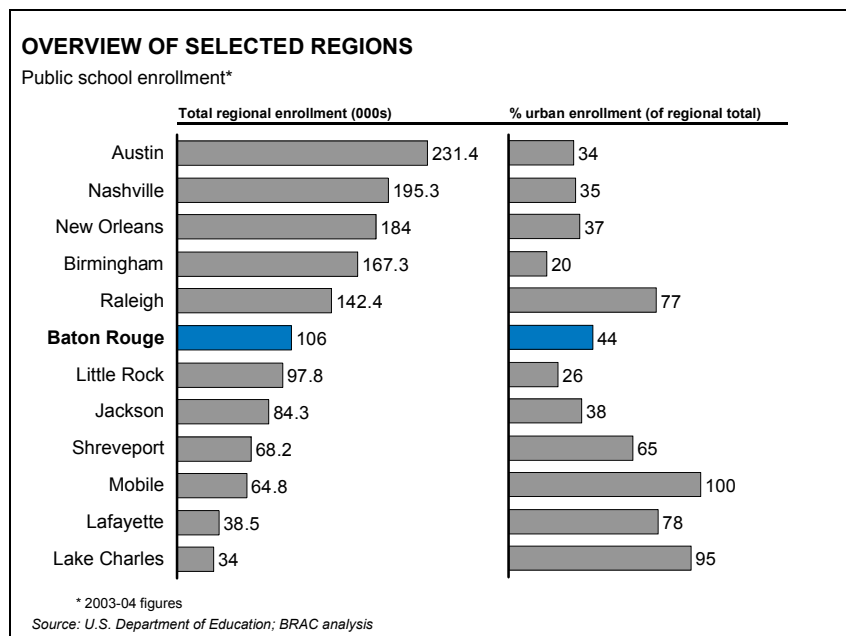


Baton Rouge Area Chamber

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.

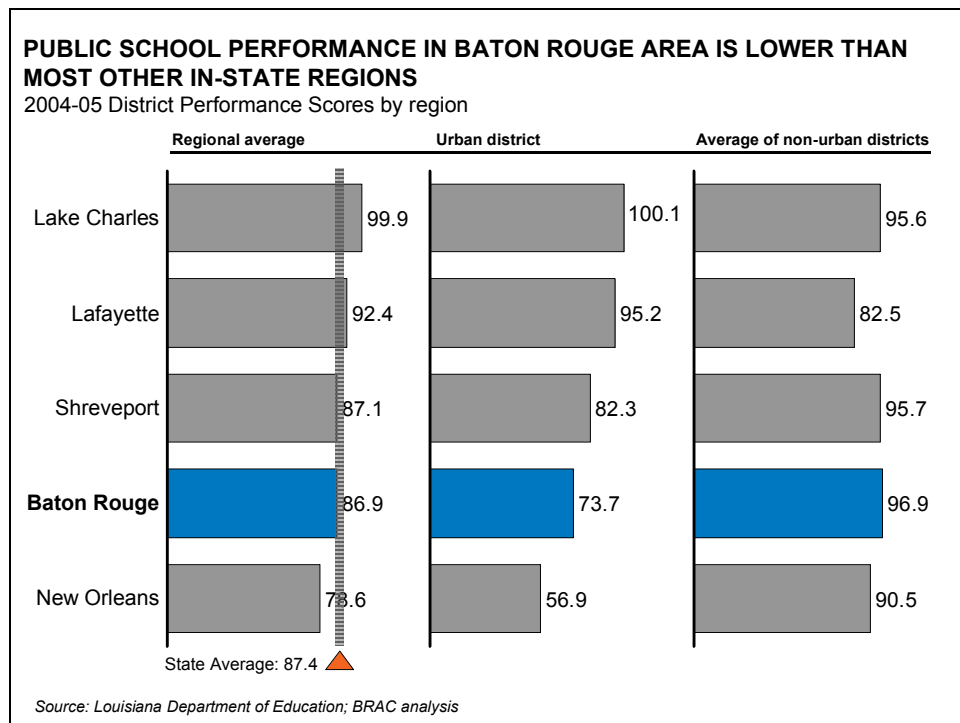
For this comparison, other regions in Louisiana and the southern U.S. were selected based on their broad similarities to the Baton Rouge area. An overview of the public school systems in these “peer” regions is shown in the following figure:



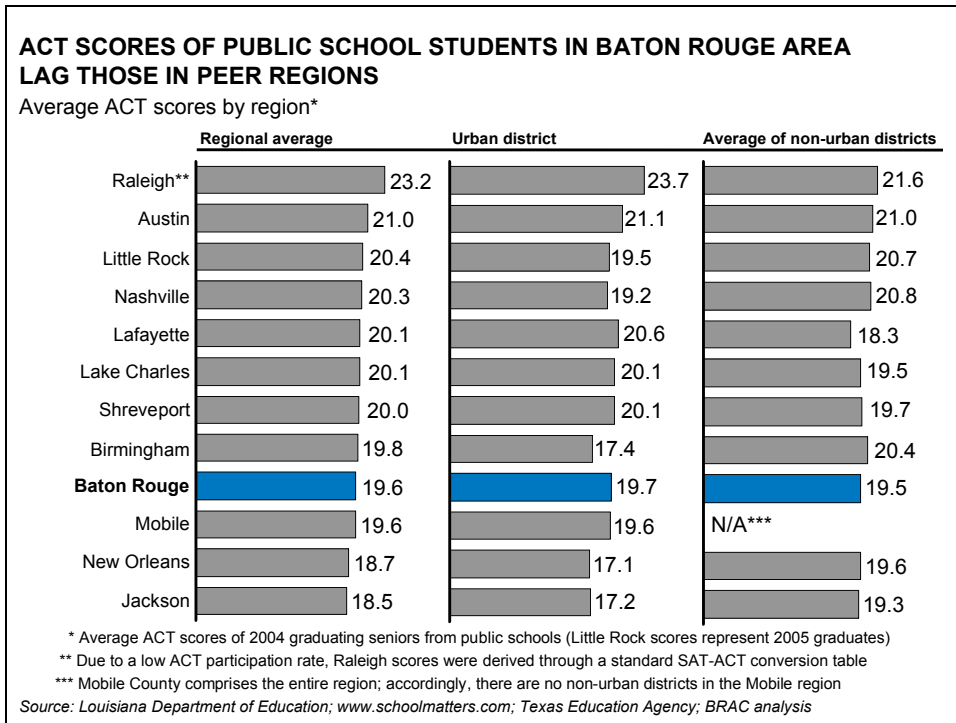
These regions are defined as metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs): land areas that have strong economic and social ties to a main city or an urbanized area with a large metropolitan population. MSAs fulfill certain requirements of metropolitan character defined by the federal government, and may include 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

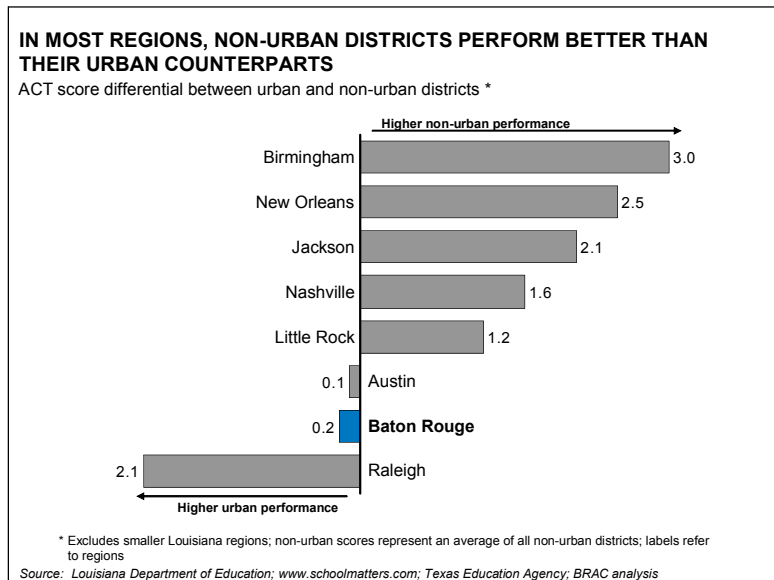
District Performance Scores (DPS)
 The Louisiana Department of Education determines DPS measures by assessing student test scores, attendance, and drop-out rates. As such, the DPS program provides a broad measure of district and regional performance. However, since the program is particular to Louisiana, 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.



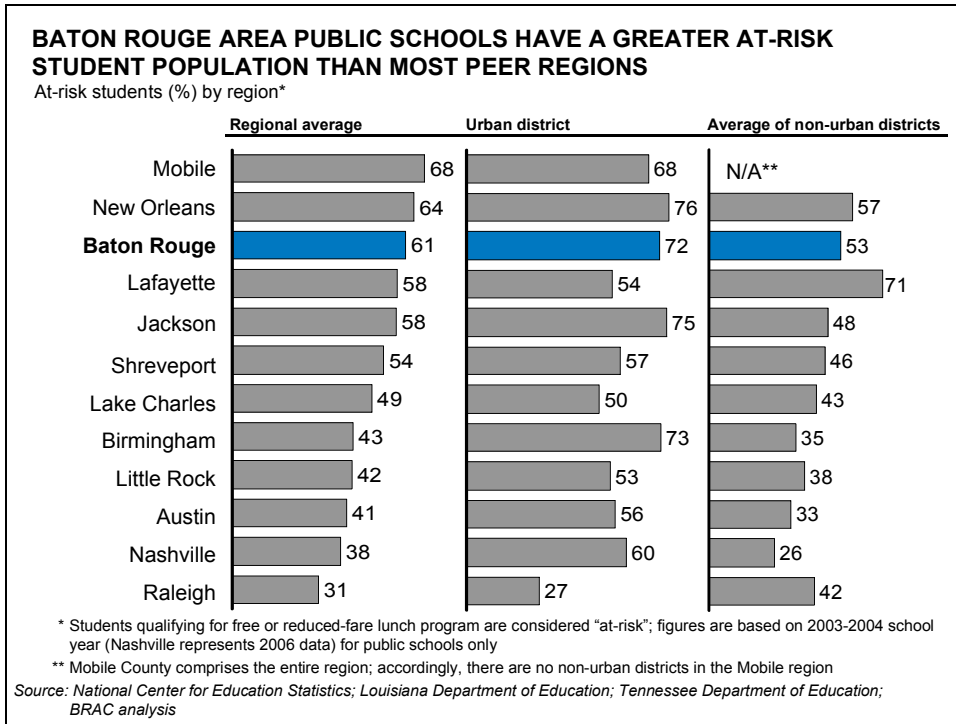
Challenges of Public Schools in Metro Areas: Similar in Kind, Different in Degree

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.

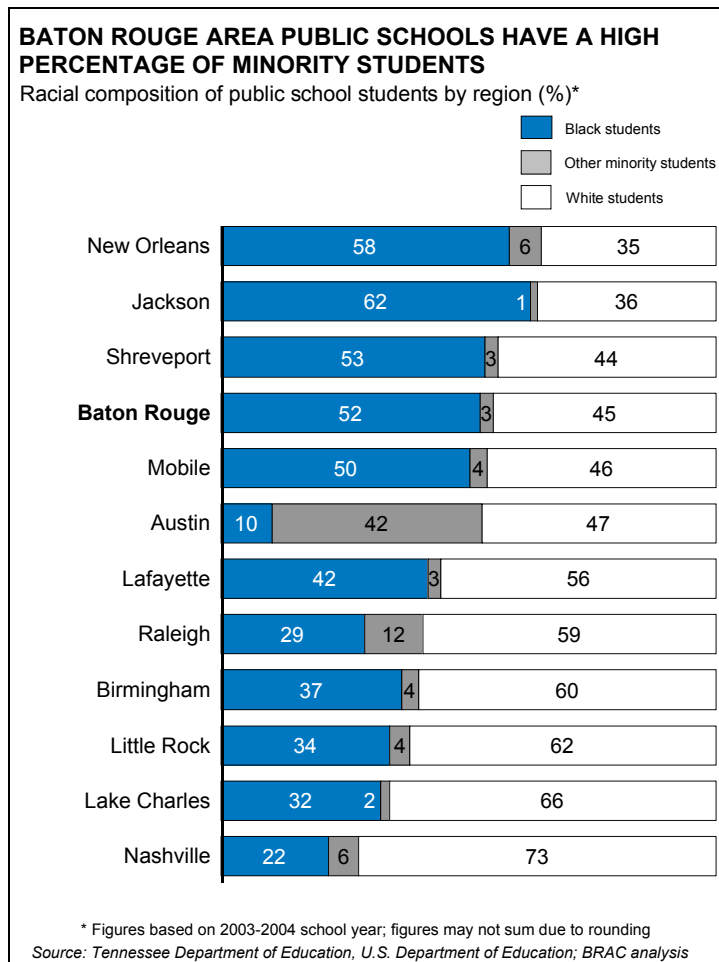


Among major urban districts within the selected regions, EBR Parish serves the fourth-highest percentage of at-risk students (72 percent), following Orleans Parish, Jackson, and Birmingham. In most regions, including the Baton Rouge area, the proportion of low-income students is especially high in urban 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.

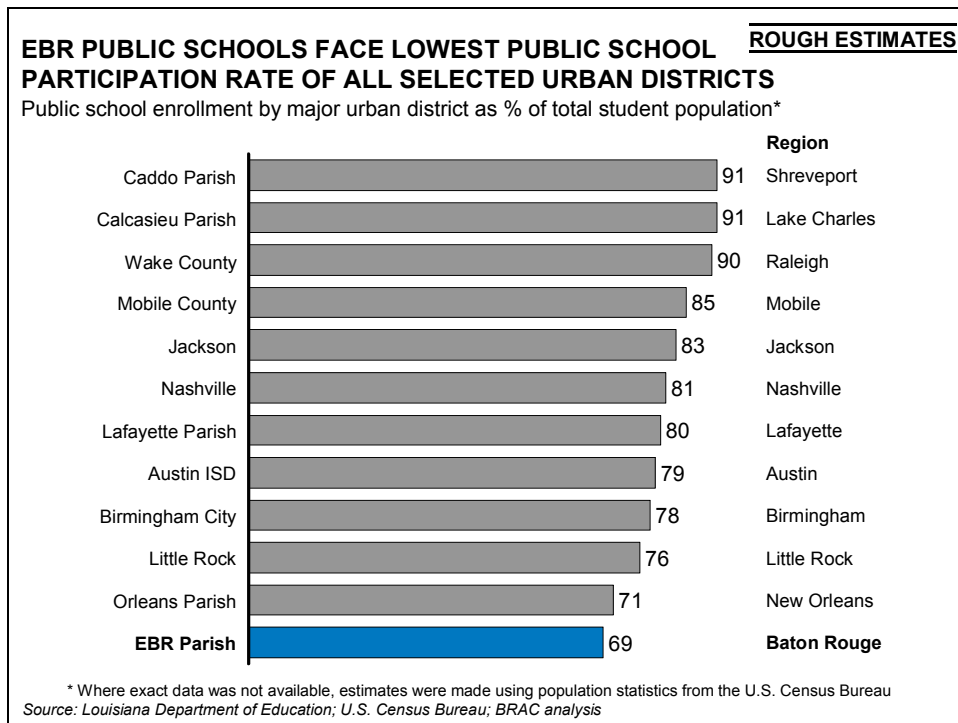
As with the proportion of at-risk students, the **racial composition** of the student body provides important information on the context of school districts (see Part 1 for more information on racial composition). Across the country, black students historically attain lower scores on state and national 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.

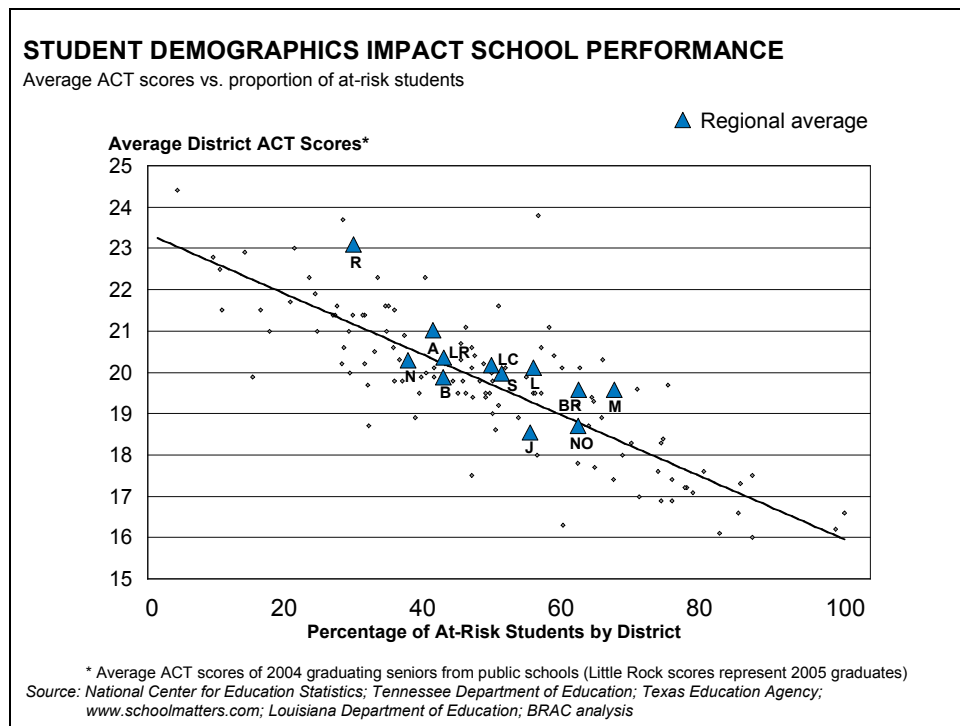
Finally, **nonpublic enrollment figures** can shed light on the challenges facing public schools, showing the level of participation and community involvement in the public school system as well as the movement of students to education alternatives, such as private schools or other public school districts, 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

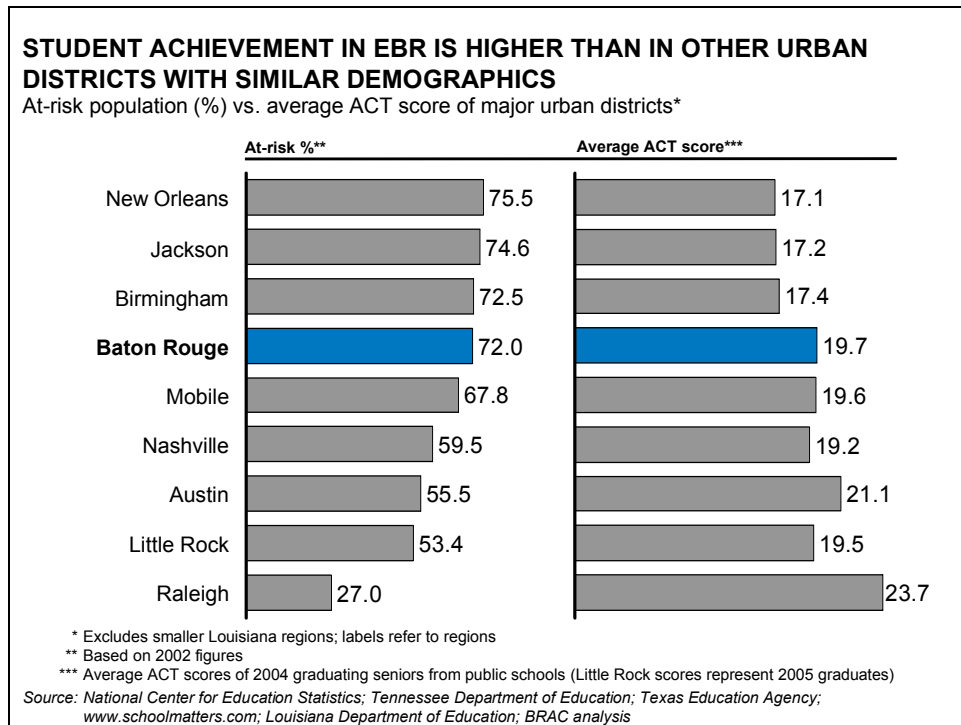
As seen in the first part of this series, it is important to view student achievement in a way that accounts for the proportion of economically disadvantaged students in a given district. In the following figure, the average ACT scores of all 118 districts in the selected regions are plotted against 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.