


RESEARCH SERIES 

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)



Baton Rouge Area Chamber

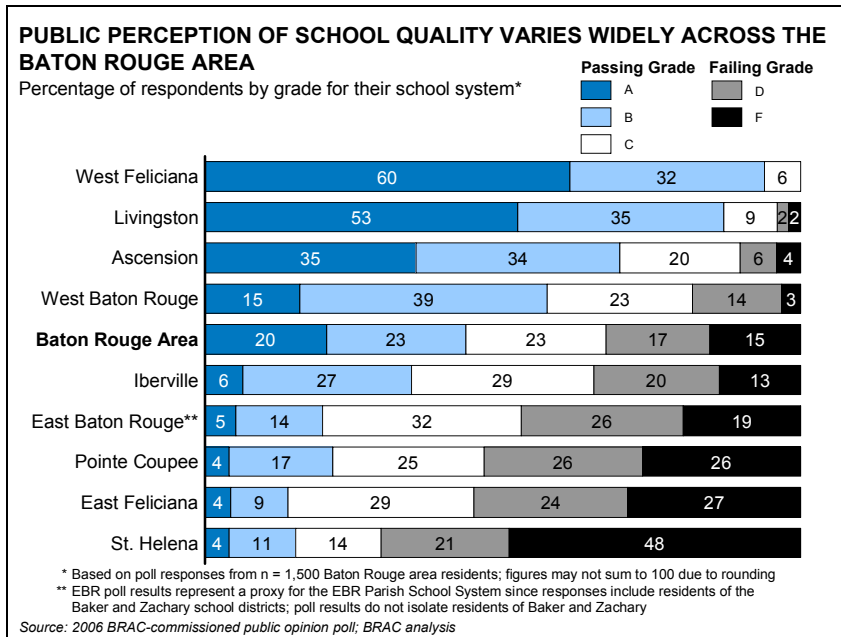
On September 30, voters throughout the Baton Rouge area will elect school board members for their districts. To spark discussion and galvanize public participation in the elections, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) initiated a five-part research series highlighting key issues in the 11 school districts 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.

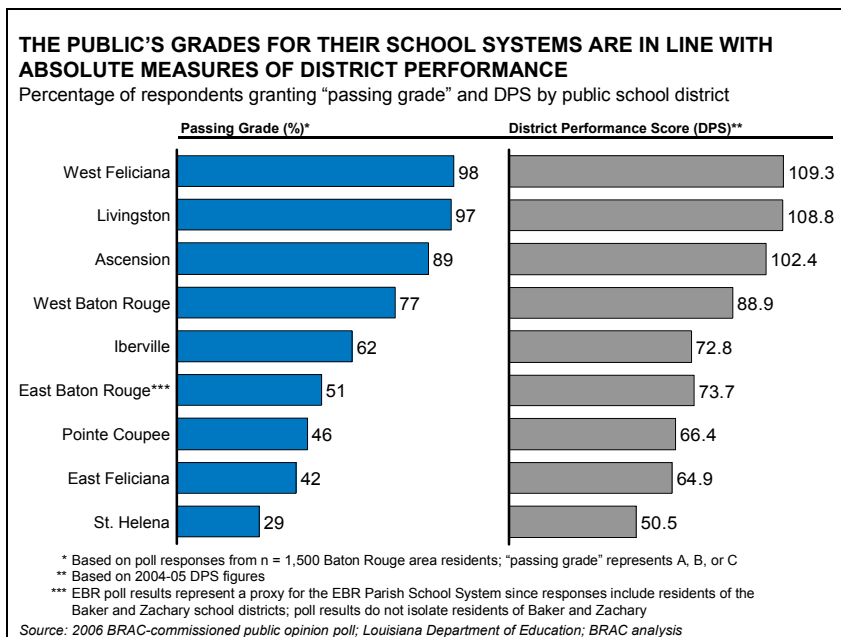
Building on the discussion in the first three installments of the series, Part 4 gauges public perceptions of school performance, factors that impact student achievement, and various potential reforms based on the results of a 1,500-person telephone poll conducted throughout the nine-parish Baton Rouge 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 ± 3.0 percent across the Capital Region as a whole, with ± 4.5 percent in East Baton Rouge, ± 7.0 percent in Ascension and Livingston, and ± 10.0 percent in the remaining six parishes.

Perceptions of Public Education in the Baton Rouge Area

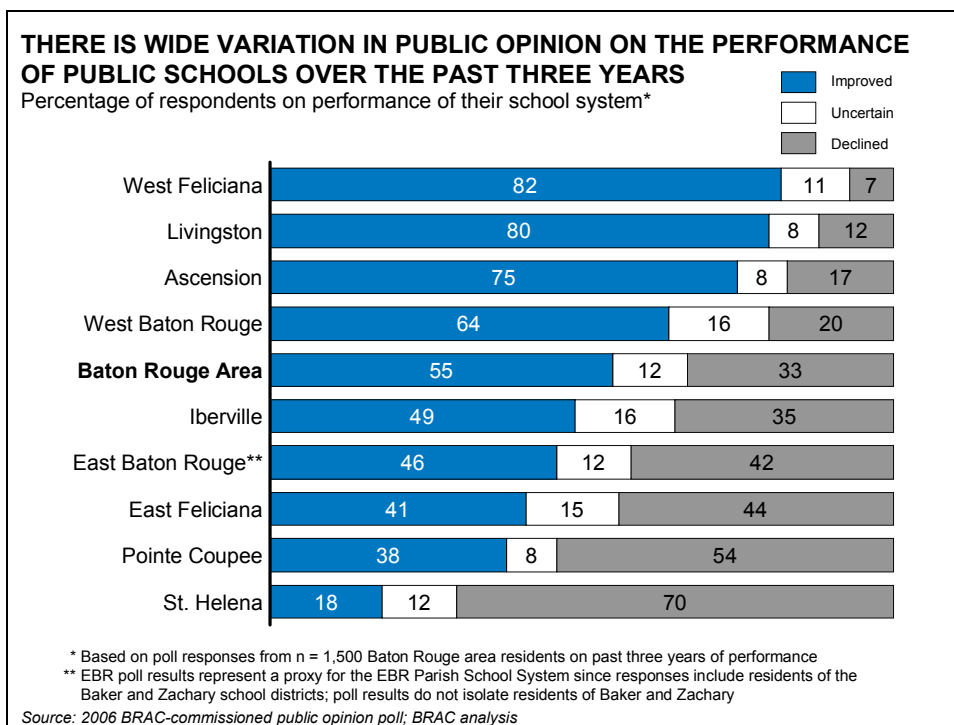
Across the Baton Rouge area, people have widely varying perceptions regarding the performance of their public school systems. One in five respondents believes that their public school system deserves an “A,” while 15 percent give their system an “F.” Opinions differ significantly by district. Over 50 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.



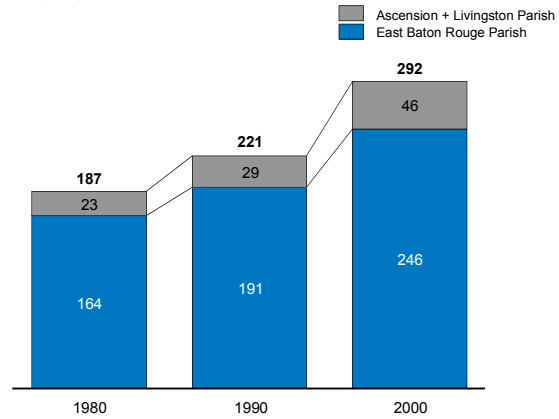
Still, it is also true that Baton Rouge area students continue to perform relatively poorly in absolute terms when compared to peer cities and regions across the southern United States. Based on average ACT scores, for example, student achievement in the Capital Region lags every selected region throughout 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...

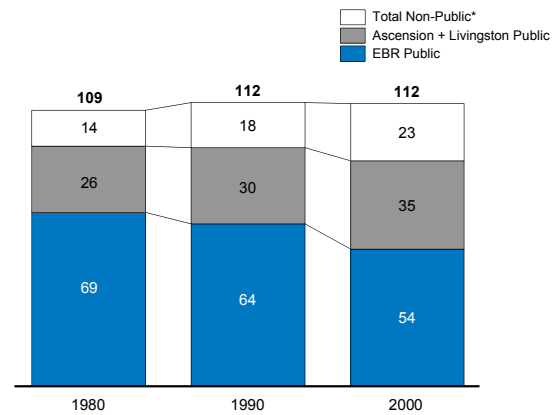
Total employment (000s)



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

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

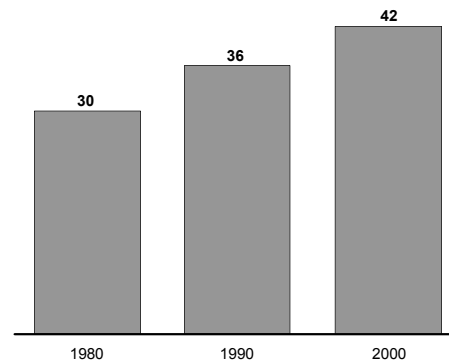
Total student enrollment (000s)



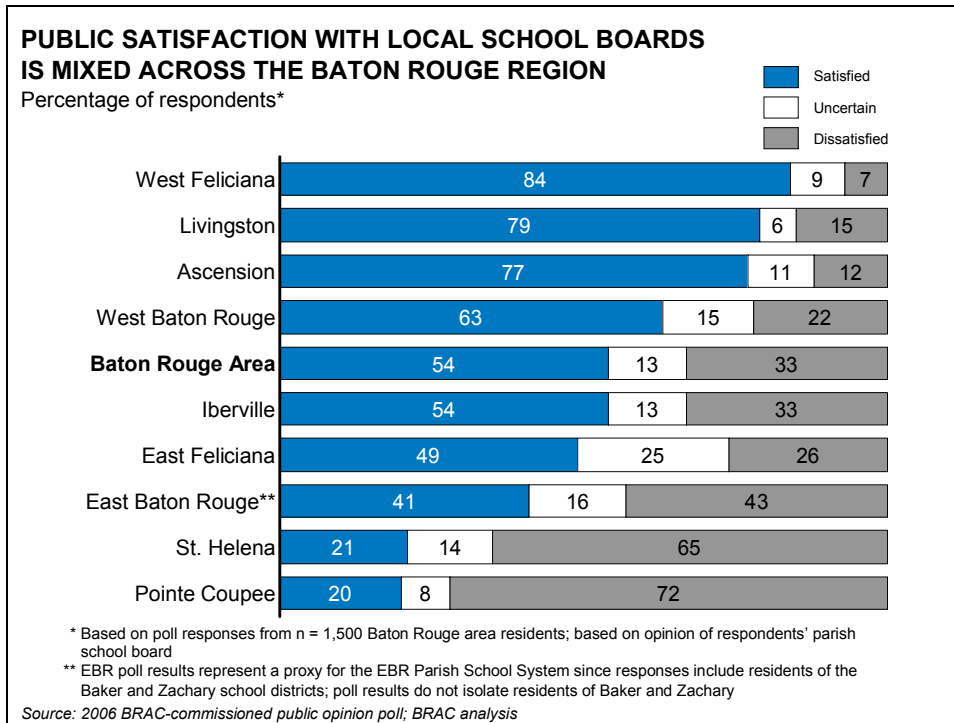
* Cumulative total non-public enrollment in Ascension, EBR, and Livingston
Source: Louisiana Department of Education; BRAC analysis

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

% of Livingston/ Ascension employed residents who commute to EBR

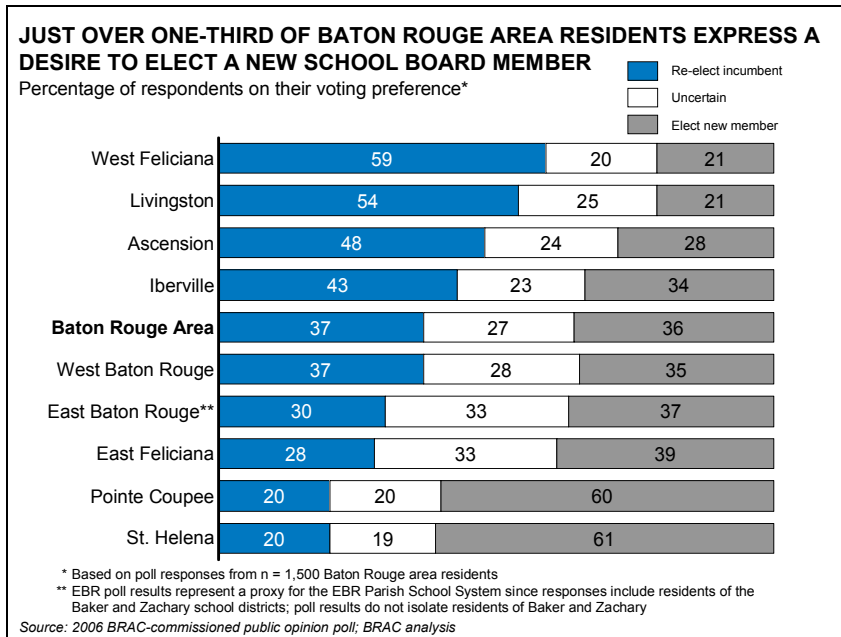


Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis; BRAC analysis



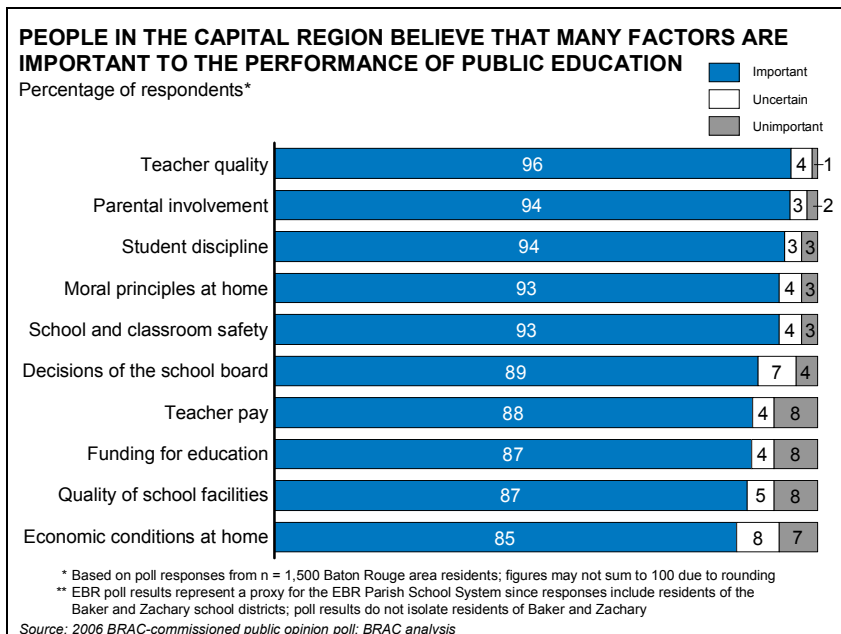
Not surprisingly, public satisfaction with district leaders and elected officials align closely with public perceptions of school performance. Across the Baton Rouge area, approximately half of residents are satisfied with their district school board and their individual school board member. On the other 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.

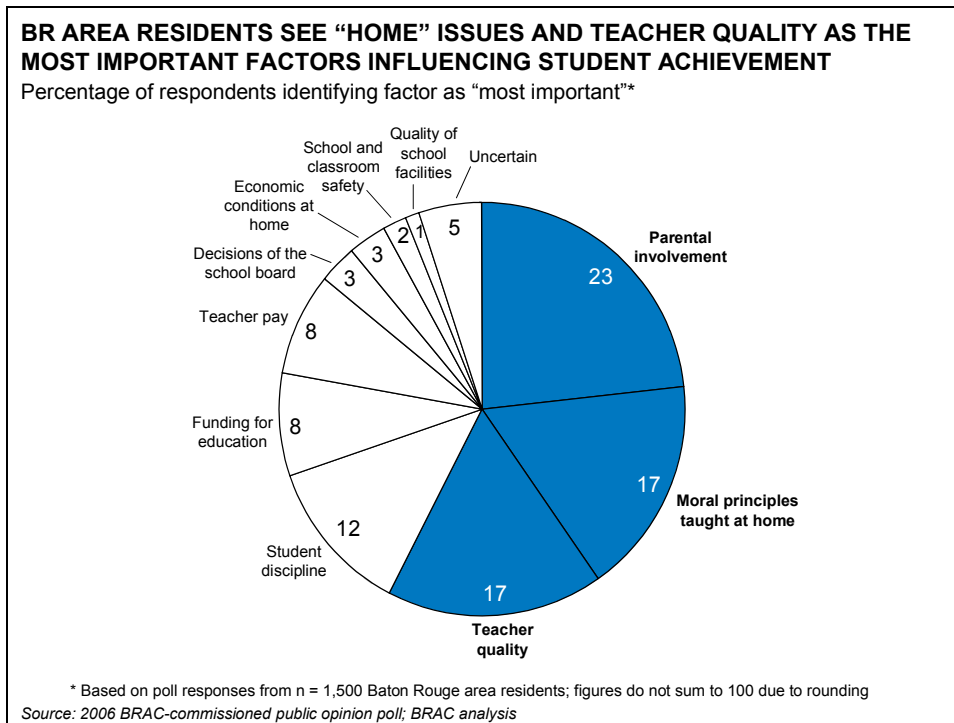


Public Opinion on the Factors that Influence Student Achievement

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.



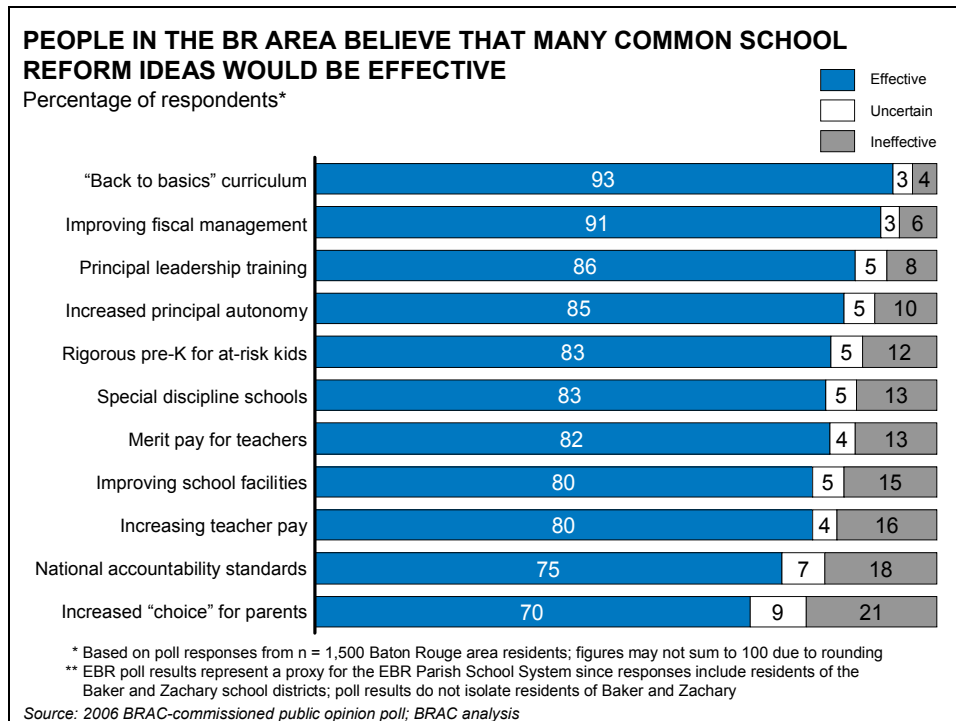
Similarly, “moral principles taught at home” ranks very high among voters, with 17 percent of residents giving this factor priority. The importance of “moral principles” as a factor receives broad endorsement from citizens across all parishes, of all levels of educational attainment, and with children 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.

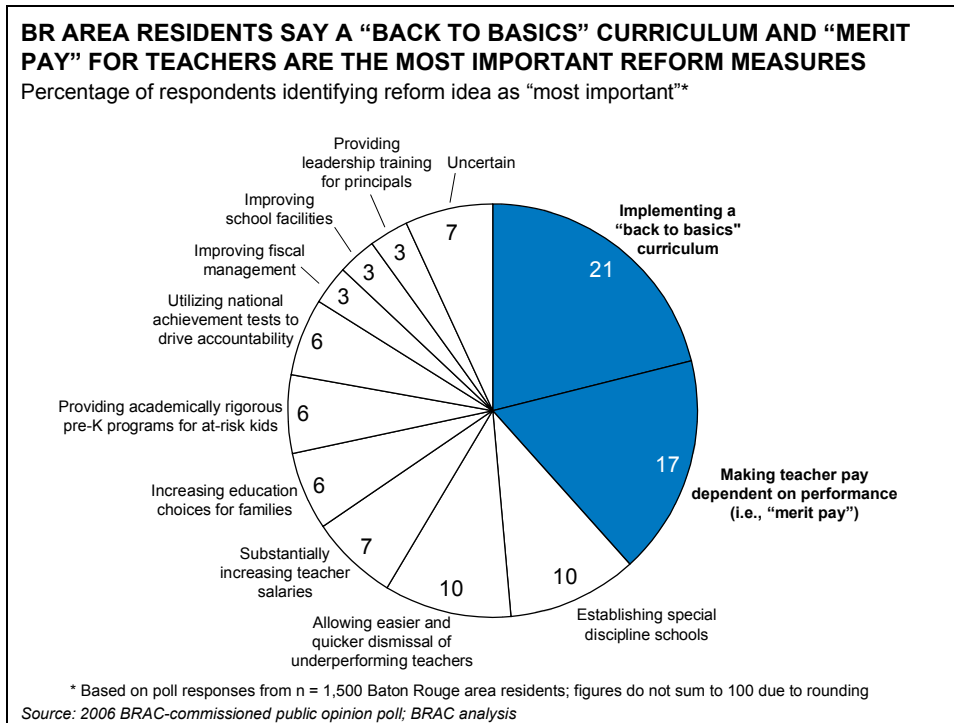
Public Perceptions on Education Reform

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.



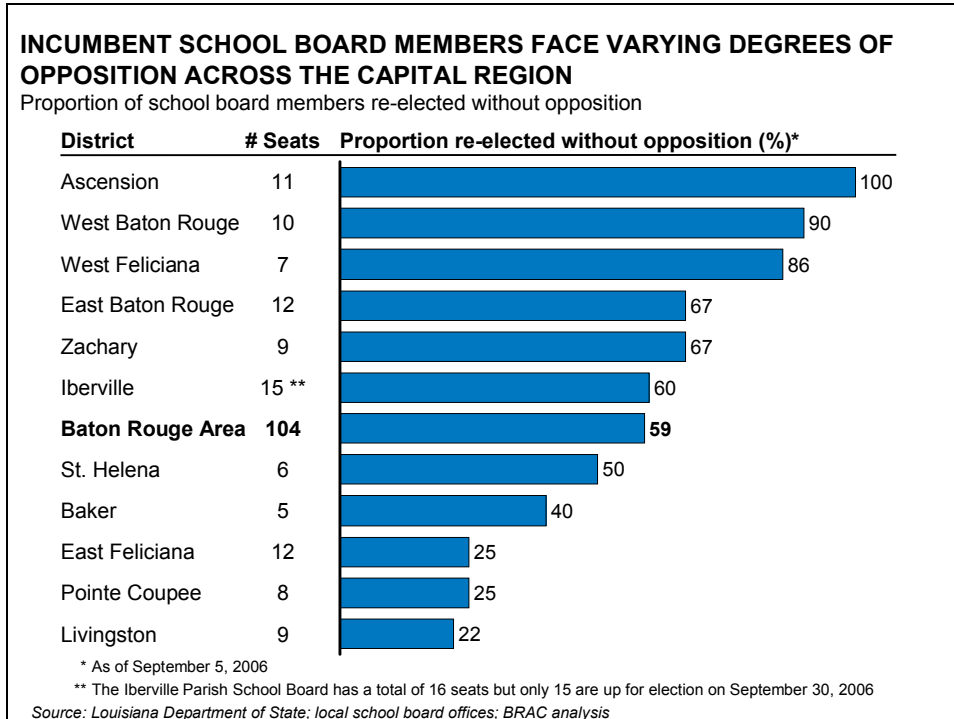
Instituting a merit pay program for teachers (i.e., “making teacher pay dependent on performance”) closely follows curriculum reform as the most important potential solution to enhancing student performance in the Baton Rouge area. Seventeen percent of voters across the region believe this to be the 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