

RESEARCH SERIES 

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)**



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.

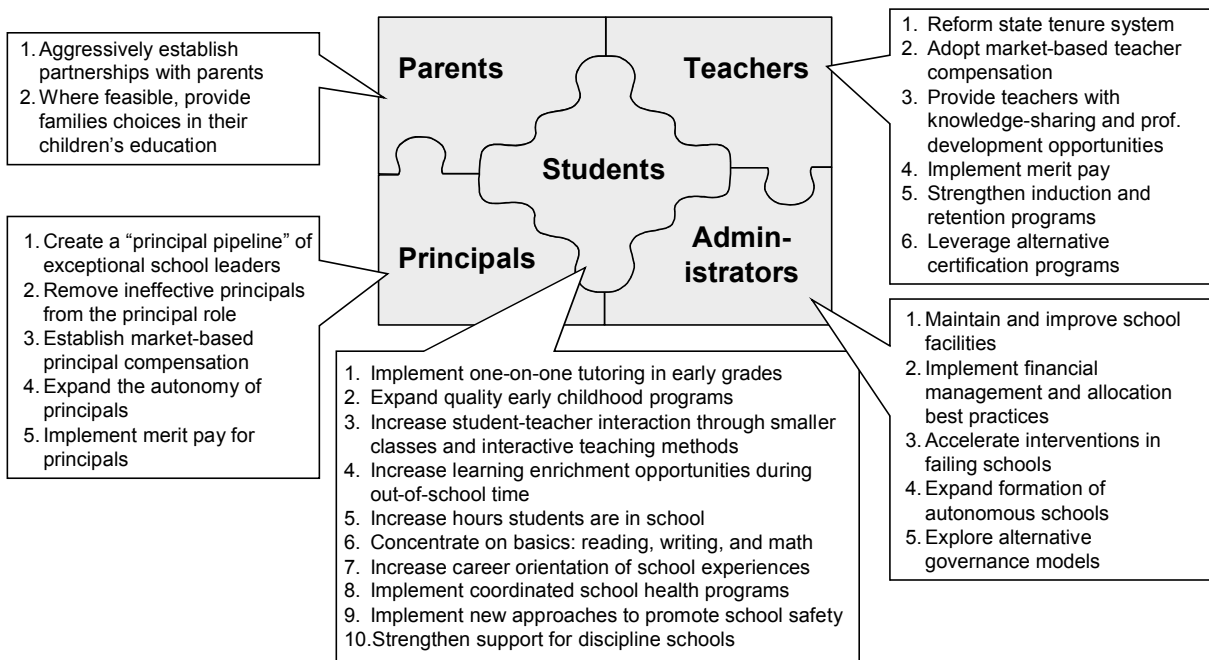
The reform initiatives are organized by the major public education stakeholder groups: students, parents, teachers, principals, and administrators. For each initiative, we have provided a preliminary estimate of implementation cost (on a *per impacted student* and *total region-wide* basis) and approximate 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: 21st 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.

Parent initiatives	Cost to implement		Impact on student achievement
	Per impacted student (\$/year)	Region-wide (\$ MM/year)	
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.

Administrators initiatives	Cost to implement		Impact on student achievement
	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.