



Baton Rouge Area Chamber®

*Leading Economic Development  
in the Baton Rouge Area*

## **BRAC Public Policy Commentary: New student test scores should be met with discernment, determination**

*Louisiana's students have demonstrated impressive gains and deserve the opportunity to further achieve under higher standards*

*By Liz Smith, J.D.*

*Director of Policy and Research*

Next week, the Louisiana Department of Education will release preliminary results from its annual statewide student assessment, the first such results under the full implementation of new and more rigorous Louisiana Student Standards tested by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). As state education Superintendent John White has [noted](#), the report “will be sobering, but it will show evidence of progress.” While BRAC shares that sentiment, we also believe that the results should be reviewed in proper context, and not as a pretext for diverting from the commitment to higher standards.

Progress has been the byword for the past several years of education improvement in Louisiana. In fact, the achievements and challenges of the 13 school districts in the 9-parish Capital Region, which BRAC summarizes each year into a [Regional Education Report Card](#), showcased an exceptional level of growth in school and district performance scores across the region for the 2013 – 2014 school year.

But this progress was also met with an important piece of feedback from the business community: namely, that while many of our Capital Region school districts are reaching the upper echelons of Louisiana's top ten districts, we need to keep in mind that the very top of a state that ranks low across the country is not the objective we should ultimately seek to attain.

This organization and its stakeholders have been looking forward to the 2014 – 2015 Regional Education Report Card, because it will be not only the first under the Louisiana State Standards, but also the first that will be comparable to 10 states and the District of Columbia, serving as a reminder of the road we have yet to travel.

BRAC, like the state Superintendent, anticipates that Louisiana students' scores will be lower than they have been in the past – a reasonable conclusion given that higher standards are harder to achieve. When the newest set of scores is released, BRAC urges parents and policymakers to review the results with both clarity and discernment, keeping an eye on the goal of economic competitiveness through achieving higher standards.

On Louisiana's football fields, as in Louisiana's classrooms, the point of adopting higher standards is to establish a goal that will ultimately prepare participants for competition. Setting standards high allows for continuous assessment of abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, and is only given more value when a comparison can be made to those with demonstrated success. But if our young athletes do not make the Heisman shortlist after their very first game, Louisiana's coaches do not throw in the towel or lower their

expectations. BRAC asks that when the newest set of statewide assessment scores are released, Louisiana applies to its classrooms the same grit and resolution that we bring to the playing field.

### Education Excellence, the Key to Economic Prosperity

Drawing a correlation between educational excellence and economic prosperity is critical to this issue. Those students who have been properly prepared through their education are the most likely to succeed once they enter the workforce. Further, they are more likely to be the innovators and job creators that drive economic growth, spurring even greater opportunity for themselves, their peers, and their communities.

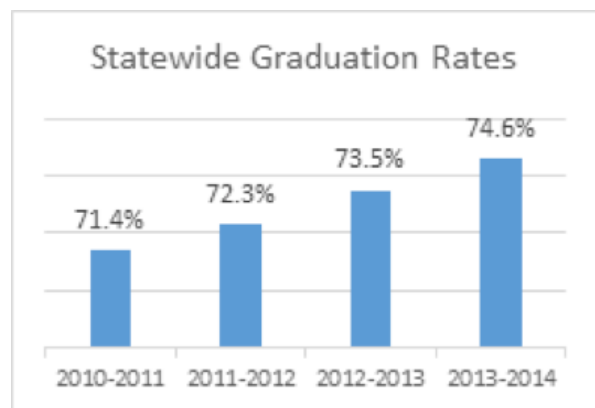
This correlation grows in importance with each passing year, as the Baton Rouge economy becomes more knowledge-based and the competition for jobs becomes more global. No longer do our students vie for jobs against merely their neighbors across town, but they also compete with peers across the country and around the world.

It's a dynamic all the more significant when looking at the current economic growth opportunity resounding throughout the Baton Rouge Region, with the number of available high-quality jobs at an all-time high, and even more opportunity to come, if we can prove ourselves competitive.

From BRAC's perspective, this means that for Baton Rouge Area students to seize these opportunities, the educational expectations placed upon them must be as vigorous as those placed on students across the globe. In short, the Louisiana State Standards offer students, and our region, the opportunity to compete and succeed on a global scale.

As Louisiana has transitioned, since 2010, to the higher English/Language Arts and Math standards tested by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the standards have been met with some trepidation and controversy. So much so that a new Louisiana Student Standards review process was established jointly by the Governor, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and Legislature during the 2015 legislative session. This [public review process](#) is on-going and will continue through the release of the first set of scores.

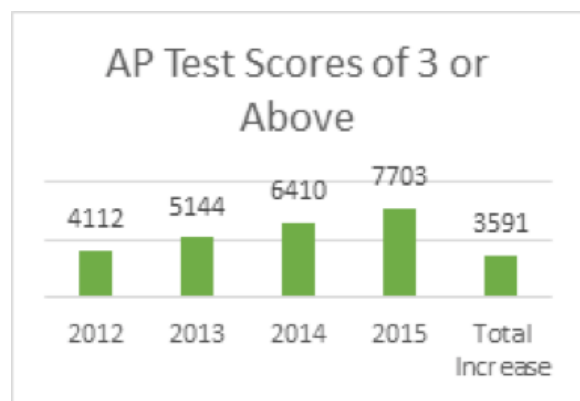
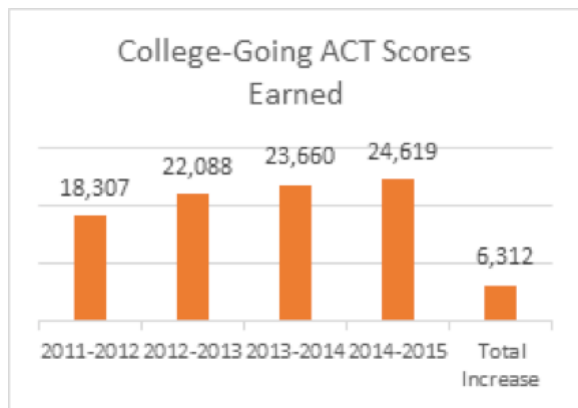
Again, should the scores be lower than they have been in the past, we urge statewide education policymakers, including the professional educators and experts participating in the review process, to resist reflexive reactions that might lead to unnecessary modification of the standards. Rather, as the voice of businesses for the Capital Region, supporting and advocating for the development of a competitive workforce, BRAC appeals upon policymakers to keep the standards in place and allow students the opportunity to achieve them.



### Louisiana Students are on the Path to Achievement

In the midst of the debate surrounding the Louisiana State Standards, the last few months have provided clear signs of progress attributable to Louisiana’s education reform movement. Amid the [laudatory opinion pieces](#) recently released [concerning the turnaround](#) in [New Orleans public schooling](#) since [Hurricane Katrina](#), the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) also released data showing our students’ great progress.

LDE found that Louisiana’s high school [graduation rate has never been higher](#), that our [students are achieving more college-going \(18+\) ACT scores than ever](#), that our [annual ACT gain leads the nation](#), and that the state’s number [of qualifying scores on AP exams \(Advanced Placement\) has grown 87 percent since 2012](#), putting our growth (if not our performance) among the best in the nation.



These striking improvements are all attributable to a greater level of expectation and accountability being placed upon Louisiana’s educators and students. The results are of the type we can expect if we trust that our students can do better and require them to try. The data tells an impressive story of student improvement that, when taken in context, both validates past effort and undergirds the importance of staying the course.

### Taking Achievement in Context

Putting our successes into perspective is necessary, not only to drive our next steps, but to motivate us to keep moving forward. The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), or “the Nation’s Report Card,” from the National Center for Education Statistics, provides this perspective. The NAEP is the only exam that is taken by a statistically significant sample of students from every state (and the District of Columbia). Unfortunately, the latest NAEP findings (2013) really do serve to support the feedback BRAC has received on our annual [Education Report Card](#).

Subject	Rank	Trailed By
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math	50/52	Mississippi, the District of Columbia
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading	48/52	Alaska, Mississippi, New Mexico, the District of Columbia
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math	49/52	Alabama, Mississippi, the District of Columbia
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading	49/52	Mississippi, New Mexico, the District of Columbia

This data shows that [Louisiana trails the majority of the nation in these major benchmark assessments](#), earning scores higher than only the states of Alabama, Alaska, Mississippi, New Mexico, and the District of

Columbia. Our highest ranking among the states and territories tested was 48<sup>th</sup> out of 52 – a disappointing showing that underscores the need to push for greater achievement under higher standards.

*Stay the Course with the Louisiana State Standards*

Louisiana has clearly made an investment in its future, with policy changes that hold educators and students to higher standards. While the forest-level data tells us we still have a long way to go, the tree-level data demonstrates that we're more than capable of reaching our goals.

BRAC is eagerly anticipating the release of the first set of student scores under PARCC, the first time that Louisiana student performance will be truly comparable on a timely basis to students in other states (specifically, Arkansas, Colorado, DC, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, and Rhode Island). This is also the first set of student scores that are entirely related to Louisiana's fully-implemented, higher, Louisiana State Standards, which in BRAC's view are a critical component of the progress our students have made in the last few years and the greater gains to come.

But like the need to take both our successes and our challenges in context, some perspective will also be necessary when the scores are released. BRAC does not expect the scores to be exceptionally high. In fact, we anticipate quite the opposite.

But we further posit that that's a reasonable outcome, because transitioning to higher standards is difficult. Even with the generous timeline for implementation provided by the Department of Education, teachers have had to learn new ways of teaching, administrators have had to jump start their teacher development, parents have had to reassess how best to support their children academically, and students have faced a level of expectation that most of them never before encountered.

Reaching for and attaining goals under a higher set of standards, whether in school, at work, in the gym, on the field, or otherwise, is difficult. We should therefore not only be understanding of a dip in student scores, we should be both realistic and courageous enough to stay the course and let our investment in Louisiana's future fully take hold.

The improvements noted above in Louisiana's ACT, AP, and graduation data serve as a demonstration of what our students can achieve while making the tough transition to higher standards, and their achievements should make the state proud. Unless we keep directing our students at that greater level of expectation, at that higher set of standards, we will never see them reach their full potential as productive members of the global workforce.

Looking at what they've already done, just imagine what our students can achieve once the Louisiana State Standards are nothing but old hat.

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