

RESEARCH PAPER 

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A Snapshot of East Baton Rouge Parish Schools

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Public education is a critical issue in East Baton Rouge Parish (EBR). The Baton Rouge area is building much of its economic future based on efforts to compete nationally and globally for knowledge-based jobs. The region is well-positioned, in many ways, to do that with the diverse group of post-secondary institutions in the region, enviable natural and economic assets, and a proven and growing spirit of entrepreneurship. In addition, the region boasts one of the highest percentages of college graduates in the state and has seen tremendous economic growth over the last three decades.

But more and more, maintaining a competitive economy requires a highly-skilled and educated workforce and that means the region will need many more educated people to help fuel future growth. A key component of building and sustaining that workforce is a quality public elementary and secondary education system. On October 2nd voters will go to the polls to elect school board members. It is important that citizens have a clear understanding of where the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (EBRPSS) stands with respect to other local school districts and the state as they choose their education leaders.

With that in mind, FuturePAC, the political action committee of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, enlisted the Council for A Better Louisiana (CABL) to analyze various school and district performance data, as well as other education indicators, and assess how the East Baton Rouge Parish School System is performing. The results of that work are included in this document.

Summary of Findings

- EBRPSS is the second-largest school district in the state. It primarily serves the capital city and many of the unincorporated areas of the parish along with public school districts in Baker, Central, and Zachary, and a large number of private and parochial schools, and some charter schools in the state-run Louisiana Recovery School District (RSD).
- EBR has a generally strong economy, even while experiencing the effects of the national recession, and has the 8th highest per capita income in the state.
- EBRPSS ranks 10th in the state in terms of teacher salaries.
- Yet, despite these positive attributes, the EBRPSS clearly struggles to provide a high-quality public education to many of its children.
- It consistently ranks near the bottom statewide in most measures of student, school, and district performance and, while there are a handful of districts with scores much lower than EBRPSS, the district is still below state averages.
- EBRPSS has an extremely low percentage of schools where, on average, students are performing at the modest level of “basic” on state academic tests.

- EBRPSS has a dropout rate of nearly 9% for students in grades 9-12, which is 10th highest in the state.
- EBRPSS has been significantly outperformed on most indicators by nearly all of the six metro area school districts selected for comparison in this briefing.
- Though EBRPSS has a relatively high percentage of low-income students, a number of other school districts with higher percentages outperform EBRPSS in several categories.
- In addition to its public schools, EBRPSS has a large mix of private schools, which are attended by almost 30% of the school-age children in the parish.

It goes without saying that many of these educational outcomes in the public school system have had and will continue to have a significant impact on the economic well-being of the community and quality of life unless they are turned around. It is clear that EBRPSS must approach these serious issues with a sense of urgency. Progress to date has been measurable, but not adequate, and there remains substantial room for improvement. Bold and innovative strategies need to be developed and implemented to move the needle more dramatically with a strong focus on turning around the district's high percentage of low-performing schools.

Doing this will take commitment, strong leadership, community engagement, and the political will to take risks, set aggressive goals, and adopt proven strategies focused on results and accountability. All of these issues should be a part of the public debate and discussion during the current round of school board elections.

EBRPSS Struggles with Performance

There are several ways through Louisiana's School Accountability System to assess a school district's performance. They include student test scores, school performance scores, district performance rankings, dropout rates, etc.

In nearly all of those, EBRPSS ranks in the bottom third of districts in the state. More concerning is the fact that they are even in the bottom 15 percent in some of those indicators.

In Louisiana, 4th and 8th grade LEAP tests for students are considered “high stakes” in English, language arts, and math. That means students must achieve certain minimum scores on those tests to be promoted to the next grade. EBRPSS’s performance on 4th grade LEAP tests ranks 61st out of sixty-nine traditional districts when measuring a composite of English and math scores at the level of “basic or above.” That translates to a 4th grade LEAP composite score that is 15 percent below the state composite.

Students perform somewhat better in 8th grade, ranking 50th out of sixty-nine school districts, though EBRPSS is still 12.5 percent below the state composite. When it comes to high schools, EBRPSS ranks 55th out of sixty-nine districts for composite scores on the Graduate Exit Exam (GEE), or about 9 percent below the state composite.

It should be pointed out that the term “basic” as used in Louisiana’s School Accountability System represents a modest goal and a fundamental grasp of grade-level skills – not mastery. That means that in lower-performing school districts like EBRPSS, far too

4th Grad LEAP* Composite**

District	Composite*	“Region” Rank	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	58.00	5 th	61 st
Ascension	69.00	4 th	37 th
Livingston	79.50	2 nd	9 th
Zachary	91.00	1 st	1 st
City of Baker	45.00	6 th	68 th
Central	79.00	3 rd	10 th
Statewide	68.50		

8th Grade LEAP* Composite**

District	Composite*	“Region” Rank	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	52.50	5 th	50 th
Ascension	74.50	3 rd	4 th
Livingston	75.00	2 nd	3 rd
Zachary	77.50	1 st	2 nd
City of Baker	37.00	6 th	66 th
Central	69.00	4 th	15 th
Statewide	60.00		

*Composite calculated by taking total percentage of students that scored “at or above basic” on math and English LEAP tests and then averaging those two scores. Test scores are for “all testers.”

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

***The LEAP score range is: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory.

GEE* Composite**

District	Composite*	“Region” Rank	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	63.00	5 th	55 th
Ascension	77.50	3 rd	9 th
Livingston	74.00	4 th	17 th
Zachary	81.50	1 st	3 rd
City of Baker	45.50	6 th	67 th
Central	78.00	2 nd	8 th
Statewide	69.00		

*Composite calculated by taking total percentage of students that scored “at or above basic” on math and English GEE tests and then averaging those two scores. Test scores are for “initial testers.”

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

***The GEE score range is: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory.

many students are not learning the academic skills they will need to succeed and open the door to solid career opportunities.

The state also measures school and district performance. School performance scores are based on various tests, attendance, and dropout rates that together lead to a rating of one to five stars, plus a category of “unacceptable.” The state’s ten-year goal, which was to be met last year, was for all schools to reach a three-star ranking. That means that, on average, students in a three-star school should be performing at the “basic” level. The vast majority of schools in Louisiana failed to meet that ten-year goal, including those within EBRPSS.

At the end of 2009, 86 percent of the schools in EBRPSS fell short of the state’s ten-year goal and 10 percent ended the period with an “unacceptable” rating (though a couple have since shown improvement and made it off that list). Nearly 50 percent of schools in EBRPSS received a one-star rating, which means that about 60 percent of students in those schools are performing below grade level. Conversely, only ten schools out of seventy-one in EBRPSS received three-stars or better for their performance.

School Performance Scores (2008-09)

District	# (%) 5-Star Schools	# (%) 4-Star Schools	# (%) 3-Star Schools	# (%) 2-Star Schools	# (%) 1-Star Schools	# (%) Unacceptable Schools
East Baton Rouge	2 (2.8%)	4 (5.6%)	4 (5.6%)	19 (26.8%)	35 (49.3%)	7 (9.9%)
Ascension	0 (0.0%)	2 (8.7%)	10 (43.5%)	6 (26.1%)	5 (21.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Livingston	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (61.5%)	15 (38.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Zachary	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
City of Baker	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Central	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Statewide	13 (1.0%)	36 (2.8%)	314 (24.4%)	498 (38.8%)	356 (27.7%)	68 (5.3%)

District performance scores follow a similar rating system. EBRPSS is a one-star school district earning a score of 79.8. The state average is two stars, or a score of 91, and EBR ranks 59th in the state out of sixty-nine school districts. Still, EBRPSS is extremely close to becoming a two-star district and when looking at its overall performance, it is not among the lowest of the low. Yet, on virtually every one of these indicators the district is still well below the state average and has substantial room for improvement.

It should be pointed out that EBRPSS is hardly alone in many of these categories. Statewide, 72 percent of schools did not reach their ten-year accountability goals and 76 percent of districts have two stars or fewer. But while Louisiana and EBRPSS have both shown measurable improvement in performance over the last ten years, the progress has been too slow.

Should the pace of improvement not increase, many more schools in EBRPSS will be eligible for takeover when new higher standards are implemented over the next two years. The state SPS standard is increasing from 60 to 65 in 2011 and to 75 in 2012. There are currently thirty-six schools that fall below the 2012 standard according to their current SPS scores. The rate of increase is 1.38 points per year. At this current rate, based on their current SPS scores, only eight of the thirty-six schools that are currently below 75 will reach that target by 2012, which is 22.2 percent of these schools. Clearly that rate of increase is too slow to prevent a majority of these schools from being designated as academically unacceptable schools in 2012. The next elected school board for EBRPSS will be faced with a monumental challenge to accelerate improvement in these schools to avert takeover by the RSD.

It is important to note that in the past twelve years, the state has implemented comprehensive improvement and accountability policies and higher learning standards, which are consistently ranked among the best in the nation. It has also provided significant funding increases and technical help for local districts.

ACT Scores

District	ACT 2010	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	19.4	27 th
Ascension	20.5	9 th
Livingston	20.7	6 th
Zachary Community Schools	20.9	5 th
City of Baker	17.0	64 th
Central Community Schools	21.0	3 rd
Statewide	20.1	

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

Given this, it is reasonable for parents, policymakers, and taxpayers to expect local school districts to educate students to at least the fundamental skill level of “basic.” Decisions at the local district level on things such as personnel, instruction, leadership, innovation, and targeting of resources are key drivers of school improvement. Clearly, many districts are not making the necessary changes to improve learning for children in hundreds of chronically low-performing schools and EBRPSS continues to have a significant percentage of those schools.

Regional and National Comparisons

To this point, this briefing has focused on a comparison of EBRPSS's performance on various indicators with the state. But comparisons within the metro region are also valid. Five local school districts besides EBRPSS were selected for comparative purposes: Ascension, Livingston, Zachary Community Schools, City of Baker, and Central Community Schools. All are either within EBR or contiguous.

District Performance Scores

District	DPS 2009	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	79.8 (1 star)	59 th
Ascension	105.9 (3 star)	4 th
Livingston	104.4 (3 star)	10 th
Zachary Community Schools	116.8 (3 star)	1 st
City of Baker	66.8 (1 star)	68 th
Central Community Schools	105.8 (3 star)	5 th
Statewide	91.0 (2 star)	

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

Such comparisons yield both positive and discouraging news. The good news is that in every performance category, four of the six school districts reviewed in the Capital Region rank in the top twenty school districts in the state. In fact, when using district performance scores as a barometer, the region has three of the top five school districts in Louisiana: Zachary Community Schools, Ascension, and Central Community Schools. Livingston ranks number ten. The discouraging news is EBRPSS and the City of Baker School System consistently perform below both these neighboring school districts and the state in most categories.

This requires a little perspective, however. Even the highest-performing districts earn only three-stars. Louisiana has no four- or five-star school districts. This fact indicates that even the state's best school districts are not at the highest levels of performance, while the lowest districts are clearly struggling.

NAEP* (2009)

Louisiana	National Rank
4 th Grade Math	48 th
4 th Grade Reading	50 th
8 th Grade Math	45 th
8 th Grade Reading	48 th

*About 20 percent of students in Louisiana attend private schools, which is somewhat higher than the national average. National comparisons include only public school students.

This is mirrored to some degree in Louisiana's national standings. Louisiana is an overall low-performing state. When looking at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Louisiana ranks no better than 45th for 4th and 8th grade reading and math. So in assessing the status of the EBRPSS in that

context, EBRPSS is a lower-performing school district in an extremely low-performing state.

As the education attainment needs of employers continue to rise in response to the ongoing growth of technology-based jobs, communities and regions must be able to compete and provide a trained or trainable workforce. The data show that the Capital Region does, to some degree, have the capacity to do this, especially when taking into account the high percentage of students enrolled in non-public schools.

Drop Outs (2008-09)

District	# (%) Dropouts Grades 9-12	State Rank** (Rate)
East Baton Rouge	1,012 (8.7%)	59 th
Ascension	249 (4.5%)	4 th
Livingston	158 (2.4%)	10 th
Zachary Community Schools	17 (1.3%)	1 st
City of Baker	57 (9.8%)	68 th
Central Community Schools	42 (3.4%)	5 th
Statewide	12,163 (6.3%)	

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

At the same time, it must be said that the state's second largest public school system, and by far the largest district in the region, must be able to play a more significant role in raising education attainment levels to enhance future economic vitality and growth while providing better career opportunities for its citizens.

Other Factors Impacting Student Performance

Research across the country clearly shows that socio-economic status is correlated to student and school performance. There is ample data that indicate that many students from low-income backgrounds do not perform as well on academic tests, are more likely to have repeated a grade, and drop out of school.

But that is, to some degree, an oversimplification of a complex issue. Many factors contribute to these challenges including parental involvement, health status of the child and family, cognitive, and social development opportunities, and the quality of child care for young children. However, research has shown that high-quality education can overcome many of these challenges, and these children can achieve at grade-level and above.

This briefing does not attempt to analyze all of these factors. Instead, it looks at the variances in performance among high-poverty schools and school districts. The EBRPSS district is generally considered a high-poverty school district. The

most common indicator of that is the percentage of students who receive “free and reduced lunch.”

By that measure, EBRPSS has the 16th highest percentage of children in that category at nearly 80 percent. But it is important to note that of those districts with a higher percentage of low-income children than EBRPSS, many have higher academic outcomes as seen in the box on the right.

There are 15 districts with a percentage of students on free and reduced lunch that is higher than that of EBR. Of those,

- 11 have higher 4th Grade LEAP composite scores than EBR
- 5 have higher 8th Grade LEAP composite scores than EBR
- 8 have higher GEE composite scores than EBR
- 7 have higher District Performance Scores

The data clearly show that districts with high percentages of low-income students struggle with various performance measures, but it is also evident that some of those districts perform better than others. For instance, of the districts with higher percentages of low-income students than EBRPSS there is a spread of more than twenty-four points in the district performance scores between the highest performing and the lowest. EBRPSS is generally in the middle of that spread.

It is also worth noting that nearly all of the districts in this list are rural school districts. The EBRPSS is, of course, a major urban district, so it is of interest to look at the performance of other urban districts around the state, as well. Orleans Parish is now a hybrid with a majority of schools run by the RSD and a wide diversity of school choices including various types of charter schools and traditional schools. This makes comparisons difficult.

Free/Reduced Lunch (2009)

District	% Children
East Baton Rouge	79.67%
Ascension	44.69%
Livingston	46.48%
Zachary Community Schools	40.78%
City of Baker	80.58%
Central Community Schools	48.30%
Statewide	65.70%

For that reason we chose to look at the EBRPSS and four other urban/suburban school systems: Jefferson, Caddo, Lafayette, and the City of Monroe School District. EBRPSS’s rankings among these districts is somewhat mixed. Among these five districts, EBRPSS ranks 3rd or 4th or at the bottom on key LEAP and GEE composite scores. Its overall district performance ranks fourth. The

EBRPSS does not stand out for its performance among these other urban and suburban districts.

While there is no direct correlation between teacher salaries and teaching quality, pay may be one factor in attracting good teachers. In this category, EBRPSS ranks pretty well. The average teacher salary in EBRPSS is \$52,759, which ranks it 10th highest in the state. Locally, the only district higher is Zachary Community Schools at \$53,572.

Teacher Salaries (2008-09 actual)

District	Salary	State Rank**
East Baton Rouge	\$52,759	10 th
Ascension	\$50,196	17 th
Livingston	\$48,017	32 nd
Zachary	\$53,572	6 th
City of Baker	\$44,711	53 rd
Central	\$47,107	39 th
Statewide	\$48,627	

**Only ranked using sixty-nine traditional school districts (not RSD, lab, or type 2 charter schools).

Compared to the other urban school districts we examined, teacher pay in EBRPSS is just below the City of Monroe School District but higher than Jefferson ranked 18th, Caddo ranked 20th, and Lafayette ranked 30th. More importantly, the Louisiana Department of Education also tracks the percentage of core classes taught by “highly-qualified” teachers. EBRPSS ranks last among the urban school districts tracked in this briefing with only 81 percent. The state average is 86 percent.

Conclusion

A recent report from Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce has a sobering message that citizens in Louisiana and East Baton Rouge Parish need to hear very clearly. It states rather explicitly that the percentage of jobs that require some sort of post-secondary education and training continues to grow and Louisiana is not keeping up.

Access to post-secondary education and good careers for our citizens is limited if the public elementary and secondary education system does not prepare them for it. Clearly, in Louisiana and EBR, the data show the public education system must accelerate progress in academic achievement.

The good news for the Capital Region is that there are some school districts that rank among the best in the state and a non-public school system that educates nearly 30% of the students in EBR. And, while there is no comparable school academic data from private schools in the parish, many boast exceptional outcomes on college scholarships, National Merit Finalists, and national exams. The district also has a handful of public schools that perform at extremely high levels, including some high-poverty schools that have earned three-star ratings.

But EBRPSS as a whole is a below-average district in a state of many low-achieving districts. It needs strategic change to accelerate improvements in student performance at rates that it has so far been unable to achieve. School board elections can be a strong catalyst for that change by stimulating public discussion and debate about the community's vision, hopes and expectations for its public schools, and, ultimately, its quality of life.

Significant change within bureaucratic education systems requires bold leadership. That includes thoughtful risk-taking, the use of cutting edge education research, and a willingness to accept innovation and new thinking. Those are the things that are truly making a difference in public education in Louisiana and across the country and can drive education improvement in EBR.