

Public Education in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area Summary of 5-Part Research Series

Part 1: An Overview of School Districts and Student Achievement

The 11 public school districts in the Baton Rouge area—Ascension, Baker, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge, West Feliciana, and Zachary—vary widely in terms of size, demographic makeup, student achievement, and district performance. Across all districts at-risk students (those receiving free and reduced lunches) tend to achieve lower test scores than their counterparts. As such, while the Capital Region includes many of the highest and lowest ranked districts in the state, no district appears to be performing particularly well once differences in at-risk student populations are taken into account. Across the Baton Rouge area, 40 percent of students fail to demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, including one in four students in our top ranked districts.

Part 2: Where We Stand Relative to Our Peer Regions

Baton Rouge area school districts generally lag their counterparts in selected regions across the southern U.S. in terms of student achievement. However, public schools in the Capital Region also serve a much larger proportion of at-risk students than those in peer regions. As with individual districts, the Capital Region as a whole appears to be performing roughly in line with the general trend based on variation in at-risk student populations. Nevertheless, our weak standing relative to other regions negatively impacts the decisions of companies and individuals on whether to relocate to our area, start or expand businesses, and employ local workers.

Part 3: Factors That Impact Student Achievement

Student achievement is impacted by a number of factors that schools directly control (“in-school factors”) and other issues that are traditionally considered outside the direct purview of schools (“non-school factors”). Our school districts appear to compare fairly well to their counterparts in other regions on most in-school factors such as teacher quality. Unfortunately, our region’s relatively high poverty levels suggest that we compare poorly on most non-school factors such as parental involvement. Given that young people typically spend only 13 percent of their waking hours in school from birth through age 18, it will take a broad-based approach—addressing both in-school and non-school factors—for our public schools to achieve nationally competitive results.

Part 4: Public Perceptions vs. Reality

Views on the performance of public schools vary widely from district to district in the Capital Region. In fact, public perceptions correlate remarkably closely with objective measures of district performance. Furthermore, public opinions are linked to voter preferences, with greater interest in electing new school board members in lower-rated districts. Finally, citizens across the Capital Region seem to understand that both in-school and non-school factors have a profound influence on student achievement, encouraging a broad-based approach to school reform.

Part 5: An Agenda for Reform

Basic reform principles and initiatives, if passionately and rigorously implemented, could result in significant improvements in student achievement. Accordingly, BRAC has identified 28 practical, evidence-based models for improving student achievement (with estimates of cost and impact), offering a menu of ideas for making our public school systems stronger and more effective. Our future economic prosperity will depend on how successful we are at continuing and accelerating our efforts to improve student achievement throughout the Baton Rouge area.