



## Schools improve; long road ahead

There's been improvement, but there's still a long way to go.

That's the unsurprising conclusion of a recent report from the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, or PAR, about the condition of East Baton Rouge Parish public schools.

PAR, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group, usually studies state issues rather than local ones. But in connection with the 2003 settlement of the school system's 47-year-old desegregation case, PAR was asked to provide continuing reports about the system's progress in complying with terms of the settlement.

"PAR was a logical choice" to do the study, said PAR President Jim Brandt. "We don't have an ax to grind and are not a party to the suit."

PAR noted that the school system has complied with 20 of the 21 requirements spelled out in the Final Settlement Agreement, or FSA, that settled the desegregation case.

The lone area of partial compliance, magnet school enrollment targets, does not constitute a breach of the agreement, according to PAR. Magnet schools are intended to attract white and black students from all over the parish by offering advanced and specialized classes in racially integrated settings. According to PAR, only one magnet school, Baton Rouge Center for Visual and Performing Arts, met, and even exceeded, its enrollment target for 2004-2005.

PAR concluded that magnet school students in East Baton Rouge Parish perform similarly to students in nearby Livingston and Ascension parishes. Population in Livingston and Ascension parishes has grown dramatically, in large part because area residents are seeking alternatives to the East Baton Rouge Parish school system.

PAR said "EBR is missing an opportunity to highlight the academic achievement of its magnet program and promote it as an alternative to private schools and the public schools in neighboring parishes." PAR said the school system might be able to tout academic successes in its magnet programs by regularly publishing separate student achievement data about those magnet programs.

PAR also suggested that the school system focus on improving test scores at low-performing elementary and middle schools. Earlier this year, East Baton Rouge Parish school officials said that nearly half of the public school system's students change schools within a given school year, often because

they come from poor families who move frequently in search of affordable housing. The trend, known as student mobility, is considered a big factor in hampering student performance.

But East Baton Rouge Parish School Superintendent Charlotte Placide said such handicaps must not keep the school system from improving. The system is standardizing its curriculum to make transitions between schools easier on students.

School Board Vice President Noel Hammatt said the School Board will have to work with other community players to address some underlying factors affecting student performance, such as lack of affordable housing.

The third major conclusion of the PAR report is that the parish school system will have to find more highly qualified teachers to work in schools with high poverty.

This doesn't seem possible unless teacher pay for East Baton Rouge Parish school teachers can be raised significantly. On average, teachers in nearby Livingston and Ascension parishes make more.

A study of the East Baton Rouge Parish school system by a group known more for its statewide focus is a good reminder that public schools affect not only a single parish, but a region. Those effects, in terms of job growth and quality of life, even touch those without students in the school system.

For East Baton Rouge Parish schools to reach their potential, citizens from all walks of life must get involved.

Click here to return to story:

[http://www.2theadvocate.com/stories/080805/opi\\_views001.shtml](http://www.2theadvocate.com/stories/080805/opi_views001.shtml)