

PAR: 75% of schools to miss goal

Report: Tougher requirements coming

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Three out of four public schools in Louisiana will likely fail to meet new state and federal rules designed to improve student performance, a report stated Friday.

"If you have 75 percent or more in a failing category what do you do?"

asked Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, which did the study.

"How do you set up a triage system that makes any sense?" Brandt said. "It is both confusing and demoralizing."

But the study said that despite looming compliance problems, school improvement goals are worth pursuing.

mance, put better teachers in the classroom and ensure that all children get needed school help. It is called the "No Child Left Behind" act.

Last year, federal officials approved a new state accountability plan that merged parts of the federal law with Louisiana's own system designed to improve public schools, a push that started in 1998. About 1,400 public schools are part of the program.

One of the major parts of the new

system requires schools to meet annual improvement targets. The aim is to stay on track so that all schools will be classified as proficient by the 2013-14 school year.

However, PAR said roughly three-fourths of public schools — about 1,050 — will likely miss their short- and long-term targets. Those that fail to meet achievement goals two years in a row face a variety of sanctions, including a state takeover.

The study said the two chief hurdles are:

- Ensuring that a wide range of public school students, including black students, those from poor families and special-education students, meet annual improvement targets in reading and math.
 - Increasingly rigorous improvement goals for all students.
- Student achievement gains in the last three years of the 12-year plan are equal to those required for the first nine years.

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"The current trend in student achievement, combined with the backloaded nature of the goal, indicate that schools have an unrealistic, steep climb ahead," the report said.

"It is clear to us that we are going to have as many as 75 percent or more of schools that do not pass either the state or federal accountability system," Brandt said.

Brandt said such a breakdown, which other states face too, risk a loss of public confidence in school improvement efforts.

Louisiana's new system for grading public schools, including parts of the federal law, is generally tougher than its previous system. Under the new plan, public schools will be graded every year. It used to be every other year. Scores focus on

how students fare on achievement tests, attendance and dropout rates.

Whether public schools keep pace with the rules depend on how minorities, students who speak English as a second language and others fare. In the past, those scores were lumped in with scores by other students, which made it easier for schools to clear required hurdles.

Brandt said changes in the federal law are needed when the measure comes up for renewal in 2007. He said it will let policy-makers study the experience of all states, see if they have enough resources and whether the goals of the federal law are realistic. Education officials, including those heavily involved in shaping Louisiana's school improvement efforts, could not be reached for comment on Friday.