



Amendment 8 would allow Central to become a separate school district

November 1, 2006

Editor's note: Louisiana voters will be asked to make decisions on eight proposed constitutional amendments on the Nov. 7 ballot. In order to help readers better understand the proposed changes to our Louisiana Constitution, each day we will publish one of the proposed amendments from the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana's Guide to the Constitutional Amendments.

8: Central community school system

CURRENT SITUATION: Public schools in the community of Central are now part of the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (EBRPSS).

Louisiana currently has 68 public school districts, 64 of which are parish districts. The other four districts are Baker, Bogalusa, Monroe and Zachary. The Constitution states that these four districts, and no others, shall be regarded as independent districts and shall have the authority granted to parish districts. The Baker and Zachary school districts are the most recent to gain the constitutional authority to separate from a parish-wide district (East Baton Rouge). Both districts became operational in 2003.

PROPOSED CHANGE: The amendment would allow Central to separate its schools from the EBRPSS and form its own school district. The new district would have the same authority as parish school districts, including the authority to raise certain local revenues. The amendment also would add specific language prohibiting any school district in the state from using state dollars to discriminate against students.

Four schools, Bellingrath and Tanglewood elementary schools, Central Middle School and Central High School, fall within the defined district boundaries and would be included in the new district. All public property used for school purposes within the boundaries of the new district (i.e., buildings, books and equipment) and the direct buses currently used to transport students within those boundaries would become the property of the new district. No payment would have to be provided for the transfer.

If approved, the new school system would begin operations on July 1, 2007. Companion legislation defines the boundaries of the proposed Central Community School System, requires reapportionment of the EBRPSS and defines the process for appointment of an interim seven-member school board and the election of the Central Community School Board. The companion legislation would become effective only if the constitutional amendment is approved by voters both statewide and in East Baton Rouge Parish.

If this amendment passes, final approval from the U.S. Department of Justice would have to be sought. Any proposed change to voting districts in Louisiana must be deemed by federal authorities to have no adverse effect on minority voting rights.

COMMENT: In September, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) passed a resolution opposing the creation of the Central school district. The resolution states that BESE "respectfully discourages" the creation of new school systems from existing school systems. Aside from this very cursory statement on the matter, there are currently no standard criteria by which either the Legislature or BESE judge the merits of proposals to create new school districts.

Without clear policy guidance from an independent authority, local politics and rhetoric dominate the debate. A more rational and research-based approach would guide this process toward more efficient and effective districts or sets of districts. While the large majority of school districts in the state do not face the threat of district fragmentation, some suggest that there are a few areas where the formation of new districts might be attempted pending the successful passage of this proposed amendment.

Proponents of the amendment argue that a separate, smaller school system would offer citizens greater local control of neighborhood-based schools and encourage greater parental involvement. They also argue that a more localized school district would foster a greater sense of school system ownership among voters, which might result in an increased willingness to provide financial support for public schools.

Proponents contend that student enrollment in public schools in the Central area has declined over recent years and that at least 50 percent of the students in the Central community now attend private schools. The migration to private schools and outlying areas with better performing districts, proponents argue, is the result of a steady overall decline in the test scores of Central area public school students and resistance to busing students across the parish. Creating a smaller district, they contend, would enhance academic achievement and bring students back to neighborhood public schools in the Central community.

Opponents argue that the withdrawal of Central would cost EBRPSS both financially and academically. Further, the new district would not have to pay EBRPSS for any of the property transferred.

The Louisiana Department of Education estimates that EBRPSS would lose approximately 2,500 students, which means an annual loss of about \$10.6 million in state funds, about \$6.9 million in local tax revenue and 4 percent to 6 percent of federal revenue. The combined loss of revenue for EBRPSS would be balanced to some extent by a decrease in costs, but the net gain or loss to the larger system is a debatable and highly contested calculation.

State funding to all other local school districts in the state could be affected by the creation of a new district, because the distribution of funds is based on a variety of factors, including comparative local wealth and revenue capacity.

Adding another player to the formula would lead to a debatable outcome that is difficult to estimate in advance.

Some amendment opponents contend that creation of the Central school system is racially motivated. Enrollment data show that at the end of the 2005-06 school year, the four schools that would be Central schools had a racial makeup of 47 percent black and 52 percent white.

Estimates show that the new district would be approximately 15 percent black and 85 percent white, because about 500 minority students currently are being bused into the schools from neighborhoods that would fall outside of the new district's boundaries. Though those supporting the amendment acknowledge this change in racial diversity, they argue that the real issue is a better educational system, not race.

Other opponents contend that allowing smaller school districts to be carved out of larger ones leaves the remaining larger districts with an increasing percentage of "at risk" students.

Central would be the third district to separate from EBRPSS in the past three years. Questions also have been raised about the new district's tax base having the capacity to support its own school district. Supporters of the amendment point out that the estimated local revenue per student for the new district is near the state average and well above the current funding level of many Louisiana school districts.

SOURCE: Official Promulgation, Secretary of State.

A ballot initiative recently passed to incorporate Central into a city, but a legal challenge to the incorporation is pending. The validity of the Central school district is not dependent upon the outcome of the incorporation case.

To take effect, the amendment must be approved by voters in East Baton Rouge Parish and the state as a whole.

LEGAL CITATION: Act 861 (Representative White) of the 2006 Regular Session, amending Article VIII, Section 13(D)(1). Companion legislation is Act 202 (Representative White) of the 2006 Regular Session.