

Plan would send magnet scores to home schools

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A bid by public school leaders in East Baton Rouge Parish to reshuffle test scores is based in part on another school district that did so for different reasons, officials said Tuesday.

Under a plan approved by the local board last month, standardized test scores for students who attend magnet schools would return to neighborhood schools they otherwise would have attended.

Those scores help determine how the state rates schools, and whether they are taken over for poor performance.

Critics contend the change would deceive taxpayers and make it impossible to judge a school's true performance.

East Baton Rouge educators said the change is designed to improve school performance scores throughout the parish, including schools that are in danger of state takeover.

They also note that a similar system is already used for public schools in Jefferson Parish, one of at least two out of 70 school districts in Louisiana that do so.

But there are two key differences, said Jeff Nowakowski, spokesman for public schools in Jefferson Parish.

Educators there opted to reshuffle test scores as part of an effort to lure families back to parish public schools, Nowakowski said.

The change there began in 2003. It started when a magnet school lured students from Orleans, St. Bernard and other New Orleans area parishes.

"Since it was a regional school system, we had to get those test scores back to St. John or Orleans or St. Bernard," Nowakowski said. "Those superintendents wanted those test scores to come back."

In addition, the six magnet schools that operate in Jefferson Parish include both top-flight and remedial students.

The EBR plan has come under fire in part because of the view that magnet schools here are top-heavy with high-achieving students, and that returning their test scores would generally improve results for troubled schools.

Nowakowski said the impact in Jefferson Parish has been minimal because the reshuffling of scores involves less than 1 percent of the district's roughly 44,000 students, or about four or five students per school.

Chas Roemer of Baton Rouge, a member of the state's top school board, said last week that the EBR board's plan is "horrible" and needs to be overturned.

The proposal has also triggered opposition from the Council for A Better Louisiana, the Public Affairs Research Council and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry.

Penny Dastugue of Mandeville, an at-large member of the state board whose former district includes Jefferson Parish, said she wants the state school board to delay any action on the issue next week.

Dastugue said the School Accountability Commission, which advises the state board on key issues, and superintendents need to weigh in before BESE acts.

State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek has repeatedly declined to comment on the issue. Linda Johnson of Plaquemine, president of the board, did not return a call for comment on Tuesday.