

School accountability programs under fire

- By [WILL SENTELL](#)
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Louisiana's nationally recognized system for measuring public school improvement is under fire on at least three fronts, officials said.

The criticism could turn back the clock on education improvements — generally known as accountability — that have gone on for more than a decade, they said.

The concerns are coming from Chas Roemer of Baton Rouge, a member of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, government research and lobbying groups, and others.

The criticism is part of a “very coordinated effort” that has targeted new high school standards and the rule that fourth- and eighth-graders pass the LEAP test for promotion, said Brigitte Nieland, director of education for the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry.

“It is a lot of attacks on multiple fronts,” Nieland said.

State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek has a similar view.

“We are seeing more people question accountability this year than we have in a number of years,” Pastorek said.

“It is a product of people kind of forgetting why we went in that direction, and I also think it is people not realizing that we have experienced great success as a result,” he added.

Officials said examples of the anti-accountability push include:

- A drive by East Baton Rouge Parish public school leaders and others to move key test scores from magnet schools to neighborhood schools those students would have otherwise attended.

Critics say that would undercut a key part of accountability by inflating scores in troubled schools.

- Repeated attempts in the Legislature to repeal or weaken LEAP, including two such bills that narrowly failed in the House Education Committee earlier this year.
- An unusual request this month by a group of influential state lawmakers from northeast Louisiana for public high schools to offer “dual track” course offerings, which are aimed at helping students headed for the work force, not college.

The request comes just as tougher standards begin for Louisiana’s 190,000 public high school students.

Roemer said EBR’s bid to reshuffle test scores is the worst of the three. He said it “circumvents the whole purpose of what we are trying to do” to improve public schools.

A push to lower standards is under way and ill-advised, he said.

“The problem with that view is that there is not a single instance in America that says when we lower standards we get higher results,” Roemer said.

EBR school leaders contend that reshuffling test scores is fair and is done elsewhere. The issue is pending.

Critics of LEAP in and outside the Legislature argue that it is unfair to link promotion to a single test.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, said new course offerings are needed because 18,000 high school students drop out each year.

“It is ridiculous to say we can’t have accountability in a vocational course just like we would have accountability in a more rigorous course,” Fannin said.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, said that while tougher standards have triggered criticism for years, this year is different.

“The issues are a little bit more serious this time,” he said.

Brandt said he assumes accountability critics are emboldened by heavy turnover in the Legislature and the 11-member state school board, including five who are in their first year.

Louisiana has long ranked at or near the bottom in public school achievement. But Brandt noted that the state has won high marks for LEAP and others parts of its system for measuring student progress, including an “A” earlier this year from Education Week magazine.

“To sort of pull it apart and weaken it I think would be moving in the wrong direction,” Brandt said.

Stephanie Desselle, senior vice president of the Council for A Better Louisiana, said public school problems need continued scrutiny.

“We do not want to go back to the days of ‘We can just look the other way,’ ” Desselle said.