

# **PAR** *Commentary*

*Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, Inc. P.O. Box 14776, Baton Rouge, LA 70898-4776  
Phone: 225/926-8414 FAX: 225/926-8417 Website: www.la-par.org*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
December 11, 2000**

**CONTACT:** Jim Brandt or Richard Omdal  
President Research Associate  
225-926-8414 (ext. 21) 225-926-8414 (ext. 23)

## **BESE Should Delay Decision on Two Accountability Program Changes**

Action on two items on the BESE agenda for this week may have the state going down that all-too-familiar path of undoing education reform before it has a chance to work.

The first item concerns the proposed change to the eighth grade "high stakes" testing program. According to a handout provided at a recent Baton Rouge Press Club briefing, Louisiana was the "first state in the nation to implement high stakes testing for elementary and middle school students." Prior to the introduction of high stakes testing, "many students lacking the skills were socially promoted to high school, not provided remediation, and ignored until they dropped out." The handout further stated that: "With the advent of high stakes testing, we are reducing the number of unprepared exiting eighth graders. Therefore these students, who are better prepared for the ninth grade, will be more likely to stay in school and graduate."

BESE is changing this stance through the proposed change. Their new policy would allow students still lacking skills after remediation for one year to go on to an alternative program or the next grade (with or without further remediation, depending on circumstances). The primary reasons given for the change is that retention for more than one year would increase the probability that a student will drop out of school and retaining a student indefinitely is not an effective policy.

Along with this change, a GED/Skills Option Program is being proposed as an alternative to students who are unable to pass the LEAP 21 eighth grade "high stakes" exams or new Graduate Exit Exams (GEE 21).

**(MORE)**

## PAR Says, Add One

However, the proposal does not indicate if districts will be required to offer this program, and it does not say if additional funding for the program will be available from the state.

This change would weaken the accountability program by:

- Restricting the retention requirement that is a strong incentive for students and parents to fully participate in the remediation program,
- Misleading parents and students in some cases by implying that students who cannot pass the LEAP 21 test can somehow pass the Graduate Exit Exam and receive a diploma,
- Not requiring districts to develop and implement a viable alternative for students who continually fail the LEAP 21 tests, or identifying funding for such programs, and
- Allowing students to advance to a more demanding curriculum where their probability of failure is higher due to their lack of essential skills.

Of special concern is the fact that BESE is considering this change without first determining how effective the current remediation effort is. They are anticipating that too many students will again fail the LEAP 21 requirements. They should let the current policy have a chance to work. At a minimum, a decision on this policy should be delayed until after the results of the Spring testing is known.

The second item concerns BESE's final action on an accountability program policy change that adds a poorly defined "Graduation Rate" to the factors used to determine a high school's School Performance Score (SPS).

This change would complicate the formula and lessen the emphasis on student achievement as measured by the state's testing program. This proposal would reduce the testing weight from 90% to 70% and add the undefined graduation rate variable to the formula, weighted at 20%, starting in the 2003-04 school year.

The purpose of adding the graduation rate to the SPS formula is very unclear. The proposed 10- and 20-year goals in this area lead one to believe that the primary purpose is to encourage more regular education students to

(MORE)

## PAR Says, Add Two

earn a "Diploma Enhancement." But since this term is not defined in the proposed change, and the process for calculating the graduation index is not specified, there is no way to evaluate whether the proposed change improves or weakens the accountability program. Since the proposed change may unnecessarily complicate the current formula, is not adequately defined and is being proposed well in advance of its intended implementation date, it should not be incorporated into the accountability program at this time.

In a press release announcing that Louisiana was one of three states in full compliance with federal Title I laws, Superintendent Picard stated, "This means that Louisiana has met a very high standard. Our reforms are top notch. Our schools are improving. Our students are performing better. Our teachers have never worked harder. And if we stay the course, Louisiana's future has never looked brighter, but we must stay the course."

In these cases, it appears Louisiana may not be staying the course. Therefore, PAR recommends that BESE should delay a final decision on these two accountability program changes until more information is available.