

# CLOSE-UP

## ON EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY



trends

views

insights

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last quarter century, a series of education reforms have come and gone leaving little impact on student achievement. These reforms were ignored, poorly implemented, challenged in court, repealed or simply watered down until they were ineffective.

The state is now embarked on a major, long-term effort to improve schools and raise student performance by implementing a comprehensive new accountability system. Elements of the complex new system will be phased in over the next decade.

PAR has undertaken a multi-year project to closely monitor the state's implementation of the Louisiana's School and District Accountability System. In addition, PAR will be monitoring its implementation and impact on the Orleans Parish School System.

The monitoring efforts include following the similar developments in other states; attending meetings of BESE and its accountability-related subcommittees; tracking proposed policy changes, legislation and legal challenges; collecting related media accounts; and evaluating accountability reports, test results and other available documentation. The primary purpose of this project is to assure that the accountability reform effort is not compromised or weakened before it has had an opportunity to bear fruit.

It is not the purpose of this report to evaluate the accountability program on the basis of student or school performance to date. It is far too early to begin judging the results of the program.

This is the first in a series of semi-annual reports on the status of the accountability system's implementation. Additional statements will be issued to inform the public of any potential threats to the integrity of the system as they arise.

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## Assessing the Accountability Plan

Act 478 of 1997 created a District and School Accountability Advisory Commission to develop and recommend to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) a statewide system of school and district accountability. The act required, at a minimum, that the system provide clear and appropriate standards for schools and school districts, indicators for the assessment of schools and school districts, student achievement baselines, student growth targets, appropriate minimum levels of student achievement for each public school and district, rewards and corrective actions, specific intervals for assessment and reassessment of schools and districts, a review process for evaluating growth targets and technical assistance.

The advisory commission report, released March 18, 1998, recommended a basic framework for the state's new accountability system. One of its guiding principles was "every child can learn." BESE modified the recommendations and adopted the Louisiana Public School and District Accountability System, that was outlined in a June 1998 report. The initial rule placing the accountability policies in Bulletin



741 (Handbook for School Administrators) was published in the *Louisiana Register* on June 20, 1999. The “high stakes” testing policy is found in Bulletin 1566.

Act 478 recognized the system would require continual refinement and improvement. The advisory commission also recommended that the system be monitored and refined as necessary, but suggested that major changes should not be made until Year 2009 for grades K-8 and 2011 for grades 9-12. The commission recognized that pressure to weaken the system would build as the consequences for poor performance (denial of diploma, retention in same grade, reconstitution of schools, etc.) were applied. BESE has in fact been constantly revising and fleshing out policies and procedures as implementation of the system has evolved. It currently has several controversial policy options under consideration.



This report examines policy developments to determine whether the accountability system has been compromised in any way. In addition, the report looks at several issues, including proposed policy changes, that may have a significant impact on the program’s future success.

## National Perspective



Education accountability has become a national concern over the past decade with strong encouragement from the federal government for states to raise academic standards and employ standardized testing. A recent *Education Week* special report, “Quality Counts 2001,” found 49 states with academic standards in at least some subjects, 50 states with testing programs and 27 states that now hold schools accountable for results.

Much of the national literature now considers “accountability” an element of a broader reform movement referred to as “standards-based education.” It involves setting educational standards, making sure the curricula are designed to prepare students to meet the standards and then testing to see if the standards are being met.

The Fordham Foundation’s *State of State Standards 2000* reports that a growing number of states are getting serious about accountability in that they are attaching assessments and consequences to their standards. The foundation worries, however, about the effect of “erecting tough, high stakes accountability systems atop dubious standards.”

Louisiana is clearly one of the states that has been getting serious. The *Education Week* report explains how serious:

“Last year, Louisiana became the first state to base student promotion in grades four and eight almost entirely on state test scores. A tougher high school exit test will be used for the first time this year. Schools rated ‘unacceptable’ must undergo progressively tougher corrective actions and receive some state assistance. The rating system will expand to high schools this year. The state is also implementing a system that will eventually hold teacher-training programs accountable.”

Also according to *Education Week*, Louisiana is currently one of only 18 states that require students to pass tests to earn a diploma. It is also one of only three states requiring students in some grades to pass a test to be promoted to the next grade. Louisiana’s national accountability rankings will continue to rise as planned elements of the program are implemented. However, its rankings on educational standards may require additional efforts.

National reports indicate that many of the states that have set stringent test requirements for high school graduation are now waffling, delaying

## ACCOUNTABILITY CALENDAR

### Annual Events

March	Student testing (LEAP 21, GEE 21, Iowa Tests).
May	Exam results released.
June	Summer school.
July	LEAP 21 summer retest.
October	School Performance Scores (SPS) released. New performance labels and growth targets assigned in odd years.

### Major Milestones

1997	June 30	Act 478 creates District and School Accountability Advisory Commission to develop accountability program.
1998	March 18	District and School Accountability Advisory Commission releases report containing their recommendations.
	June	BESE adopts Louisiana's Public School and District Accountability System.
1999	March	LEAP for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century (LEAP 21) and Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) exams given to state's elementary and middle school students.
	May 26	Results from March LEAP 21 and ITBS exams released.
	June 20	Rule published in Louisiana Register that officially adds Accountability Program to Bulletin 741 <i>Louisiana Handbook for School Administrators</i> .
	July 8	First group of Distinguished Educators selected.
	September 23	Baseline School Performance Scores (SPS) for state's K-8 schools released. Performance Labels and Growth Targets assigned to schools. "Academically Unacceptable" schools placed in Corrective Action Level I.
2000	March	LEAP 21 and ITBS exams administered. Fourth and eighth grade Math and English/Language Arts exams now "high stakes."
	June	Summer school remediation for "high stakes" test failures begins.
	September 14	Judge denies request for LEAP 21 "high stakes" testing injunction.
2001	March	New Graduation Exit Exam for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century (GEE 21) given to 10 <sup>th</sup> graders for first time.
	October	Baseline SPS due to be released for state's 9-12 schools and "Academically Unacceptable" 9-12 schools enter Corrective Action Level I. End of first cycle SPS to be released for K-8 schools with new Performance Labels and Growth Targets assigned. Rewards will be given to certain schools for first time. Public School Choice and Corrective Action Level II provisions may be used for first time for K-8 schools.
2002	June	Summer school for 11 <sup>th</sup> grade GEE 21 failures offered. Summer school for LEAP 21 failures continues.
	Summer	District accountability scores released for first time if policy adopted by BESE.
2003	March	Begin phasing out old GEE.
	October	End of cycle 1 for 9-12 and cycle 2 for K-8 schools. High schools first eligible for Corrective Action level II and Public School Choice, K-8 schools first eligible for Corrective Action level III (reconstitution).
2004	August	First possible instance of K-8 school being reconstituted.
2005	October	End of cycle 2 for high schools and cycle 3 for K-8 schools. High schools first eligible for Corrective Action level III.
2006	August	First possible instance of high school being reconstituted.

implementation, lowering scores or providing options. Louisiana is included in the list because of BESE's recent adoption of new options for students who cannot get past the eighth grade LEAP tests (discussed later in this report).

### Accountability Ratings

Louisiana's accountability program has received relatively high marks from several national organizations. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation gave the state an "A" in accountability ranking it seventh nationally. The *Education Week* special report evaluated the standards, assessments and accountability programs of the states and gave Louisiana a combined grade of a "B" which tied the state for 12th place in the nation.

In addition, most other states are still struggling to meet new testing requirements to receive funding under the federal Title I program for disadvantaged students. However, Louisiana's accountability and assessment program was one of the first to be certified by the U.S. Department of Education as being in "full compliance." The department noted that the state had made great progress in developing the LEAP 21 testing program and implementing the accountability program.

While a 1999 Fordham Foundation report gave the state an "A" in accountability, the foundation's 2000 report listed Louisiana among those states with weak accountability and mediocre standards. In the latter review, Louisiana met only two of the foundation's five criteria:

- State issues report cards, including test scores, on individual schools (Yes)
- State has authority to reconstitute or otherwise change failing schools (Yes)
- State evaluates and rates **all** public schools on the basis of academic performance (No)

- State actually exercises its authority to reconstitute or change failing schools (No)
- State identifies successful schools and offers recognition and/or rewards (No)

The foundation considered an accountability program strong if it met three of its five criteria. Louisiana missed meeting the third criteria only because high schools were not yet phased into the accountability program. However, this criteria will be met this spring. The fourth item on the list, exercising authority to reconstitute or change failing schools, is contemplated as part of the program in future years, although this will probably take the form of a threat to remove state funding instead of direct state intervention. The use of rewards is also contemplated but not yet funded. The governor's 2001-2002 Executive Budget includes funding to reward schools that meet their growth targets.

The *Education Week* report also used five criteria to judge the extent to which a state was holding schools accountable in 2000: report cards, ratings, rewards, assistance and sanctions. Only nine states used all of these. Louisiana was credited for doing everything except giving rewards—something that is planned for the next school year.

Using the Fordham or *Education Week* criteria, the Louisiana accountability system is now or soon will be one of the top-rated in the nation.

### Ranking Educational Standards

Setting statewide academic standards is an integral part of Louisiana's accountability program. The LEAP 21 tests (given in the fourth and eighth grades) and the GEE 21 exit exams (given in the 10th and 11th grades) are criterion-referenced tests. This means that the tests are tied to the state's new content standards. These are "high stakes" tests with serious consequences for failure.

The Fordham Foundation was generally critical of the academic standards in all states and assigned the nation a grade of “C-.” It also criticized Louisiana’s standards in several areas, but gave the state an overall grade of “C+.” (See Table 1.) Louisiana’s overall grade tied for 12th highest in the nation and sixth in the SREB region. Louisiana’s Math standards received the foundation’s harshest grade, an “F.” The evaluation also noted that several sample examination questions used in the *Louisiana Science Framework* are scientifically incorrect, ambiguous or misleading.

The *Education Week* review rated the state as having clear and specific standards for Math and Science, but not for English/Language Arts, at the elementary, middle and high school levels. The review also faulted the state’s Social Studies standards at the elementary

level. This review was based on unpublished data from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) as of November 2000. The AFT characterized standards as to their clarity. (See Table 1.)

The national evaluations of standards are not entirely consistent. However, they do indicate that, while Louisiana may be doing better than most other states, it must still improve its educational standards. BESE has recognized this fact and a statewide effort is underway to clarify the standards and make them more understandable. BESE recently discussed the need to bring to the attention of Fordham and other rating groups steps that have been taken to improve statements of standards for English Language Arts, Social Studies, Health, Physical Education, Arts, Secondary Math and Middle Grades Math.

**TABLE 1**  
**Reviews of Louisiana Content Standards**

Subject	Thomas B. Fordham Foundation		American Federation of Teachers		
	1998	2000	1999		
	All Levels	All Levels	Elementary Level	Middle Level	High School Level
English	No Grade	B	Vague reading comprehension and writing forms	Vague reading comprehension and writing forms	Vague reading comprehension and writing forms
Math	F	F	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content
Science	B	C	Vague life science	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content
Social Studies	No Grade	No Grade	Vague world history	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content	Standards are clear, specific, and grounded in content
History	C	C	No evaluation	No evaluation	No evaluation
Geography	C	A	No evaluation	No evaluation	No evaluation
Cum. GPA	1.75	2.20			
Final Grade	C-	C+			

**SOURCES:**

- (1) American Federation of Teachers, *Making Standards Matter 1999*, November 9, 1999
- (2) Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, *The State of State Standards 2000*, January 2000



## Accountability Policy Changes

The state's accountability system has undergone almost constant revision and refinement since the initial policies were adopted in early 1999. These new policies typically originate as a recommendation to BESE's Committee on Accountability and Assessment and are approved by BESE as a Notice of Intent under the Administrative Procedure Act. The proposal is published in the *Louisiana Register* to allow 60 days for review and comment. BESE can then vote final adoption.



PAR has identified and reviewed some three dozen distinct policies adopted or given initial approval through January 2001 that relate to accountability and testing. The bulk of these new policies strengthened or improved the accountability system. However, several have or would soften some aspects of the program as originally envisioned. The more controversial of these are optional promotion/retention policies for fourth-graders and eighth-graders who fail the "high stakes" tests. In addition, BESE has also discussed a controversial proposal to provide options to the standard high school diploma but has postponed making any decision until later this year.

The following is a discussion of the more significant changes and proposals BESE has adopted or is considering.

### Changed School Performance Labels



Initially, School Performance Labels given to schools based on their School Performance Scores (SPS) included the following categories:

School of Academic Excellence (SPS of 150.0 or above), School of Academic Distinction (SPS 125.0 to 149.9), School of Academic Achievement (SPS 100.0 to 124.9), Academically Above Average (SPS state average to 99.9), Academically Below Average (SPS 30.1 to state average), and Academically Unacceptable (SPS of 30 or below). The SPS scale scores were initially set so that a school scoring at the national average would receive a SPS of 100. Thus, labeling a school with a SPS score of less than 100 as Academically Above Average would mislead the public as to the true level of performance of that school. Therefore, the above and below average labels were changed to Academically Above State Average and Academically Below State Average to avoid confusion. Unfortunately, the change is sometimes ignored as some documents continue to use the old labels.

### Two Below-Basic Classifications for Students

A controversial decision was made by BESE to split the below-grade-level group into two classifications—"Unsatisfactory" and "Approaching Basic." Only students in the "Unsatisfactory" group are to be retained and/or remediated under "high stakes" testing. Students performing below grade level in the "Approaching Basic" category are promoted even though they lack certain grade level skills.

Splitting the below-grade-level group was supposed to be temporary to allow a phasing in of the "high stakes" policy. Had this not been done the failure rate on the spring 1999 Math test would have been 59% for the state's fourth grade and 61% for the eighth grade. Current intentions are to modify the policy to retain and/or remediate all students scoring below the "Basic" category beginning in 2004.

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## Transfer Policy

## Special Education Waivers

Another recommendation of the advisory commission was to allow students in schools in Corrective Action Level III or Academically Unacceptable schools in Corrective Action Level II to transfer to other public schools in the district. The parents were to be able to select a school other than the nearest one if they provided transportation. In addition, if no academically acceptable school is available in the district, the parent could transfer the student to another district, but the parent provides transportation.

The policy adopted by BESE was to require districts to transfer the student, upon parental request, to the nearest acceptable school or outside the district if no academically acceptable school is available. These schools could not be in Corrective Action Level II or III and the school or district could refuse to accept a student if there is insufficient space, a desegregation order prevents the transfer, or a student has been subject to disciplinary actions for behavioral problems. Limiting the choice to the nearest acceptable school makes it even more difficult for parents to have their children moved to a better school. It increases the probability that a student will have to remain in a poorly performing school, mainly due to limited space availability in other schools and possible court restrictions on student transfers.

### Promotion of 16-Year-Olds

One of the early policy changes was to require that eighth grade students, who are 16 years of age on or before September 30, be moved to a high school campus or an alternative program, even though they failed to pass the “high stakes” LEAP 21 testing requirement. The latest change appeared as a rule in the November 20, 1999 *Louisiana Register*. While this might be regarded as a weakening of the program, the logic of placing such students in an alternate, age-appropriate setting is inescapable. A three-year age difference at this level raises issues more problematic than social promotion.

For the 1999-2000 school year, special education students who took LEAP 21 and failed were promoted to the next grade if they went to summer school and were recommended for advancement by their school building-level committee. This waiver was extended to the 2000-01 school year, but parents were not given the option to request that their student be retained. Special education students who are given alternate assessment and out-of-level testing are not subject to the “high stakes” testing provisions.

This policy advances special education students to the next grade and requires their continued participation in the testing program for inclusion in the school’s SPS calculation as specified in the accountability program rule.

### Fourth Grade High Stakes Testing Retention/Promotion Policy

The fourth grade “high stakes” retention policy has been changed by BESE to require only one year of remediation if the student continues to fail the LEAP 21 English and/or Math tests. Thus there is a one year retention limit.

Another change allows school districts to decide locally what they will do with students that fail the LEAP 21 testing provisions. Two options were created. Option 1 students repeat the fourth grade, receiving remedial training in the failed subject(s). Option 2 students are placed in a transitional grade (sometimes labeled locally 4T or 4.5) and take remedial training in the failed subject(s) and classes in the other subjects at the next grade level. A repeating fourth-grader who fails the tests may move on to the fifth grade.

The new retention policies will apply for the first time to fourth-graders who fail the LEAP 21 tests this year (2000-01). These new policies reflect the argument that holding a fourth grade student for more than one year is not effective and may even be counterproductive. However, others argue that promotion after one year of remediation is still social



promotion and that allowing a student to move on who has not attained grade level competency reduces the pressure on the student, the parents and the system to be accountable.

### **Eighth Grade High Stakes Testing Retention/Promotion Policy**

BESE recently approved a new policy that allows school districts to move an eighth-grader who has completed one year of remediation, attends summer school and passes one of two LEAP 21 tests to a transitional grade (not the ninth grade) on the high school campus. The policy also allows parents of such students to decide if their child should enter a pre-GED/Skills Option.



As initially discussed in November, this proposal had not yet been fleshed out and it drew a great deal of opposition. The proposal was challenged as a major step backward from the original “high stakes” concept. At its December meeting, BESE approved a compromise that made the policy change more palatable. Initial details of a pre-GED/Skills Option were presented and the requirement for remediation was continued. In addition, the change would require students to attend summer school and pass either the Math or English LEAP test before moving on to a high school campus.

The original eighth grade “high stakes” policy was very similar to the fourth grade policy, except there was no one-year limit on retaining students. The local school district had the discretion to place students who fail the English and/or Math LEAP 21 tests in one of two options. They could be retained in the eighth grade (sometimes labeled 8R) with special remedial classes OR moved to a high school campus in a transitional grade (sometimes labeled 8.5).



In spite of the added clarification, the new eighth grade progression policy remains quite

complex— enough so that the Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) staff began developing flow charts to explain it. If finally adopted, the policy will apply for the first time to eighth-graders who are currently repeating the grade or in remediation on the high school campus.

This new eighth grade policy might be considered by some to be a form of social promotion. However, while the policy gives students optional paths beyond the eighth grade it no way assures them of a high school diploma. The GEE 21 remains the gatekeeper to the regular diploma. Students using these new options would still have to complete the standard requirements, including passing the exit exam, to receive a standard diploma or complete the requirements and pass the test for a Louisiana Equivalency Diploma (GED).

## **Proposals Still Under Consideration**

### **High School Diploma Options**

BESE has been considering a controversial proposal to add several high school diploma options, some of which would not require passage of the GEE 21. A final decision has been delayed until later this spring.

The proposal would retain the current diploma requirements in a “Standard Diploma Option.” Currently, students must complete 23 Carnegie units of high school courses and pass the GEE 21 for a diploma.

The proposal would add two advanced diplomas under the “Standard Diploma Endorsement Options.” Under these options, students could earn an academic or career/technical endorse-

ment on their diplomas if they pass all components of the GEE 21, complete 18.5 Carnegie units of core courses (23 Carnegie units total), meet the high school graduation requirements, meet the TOPS and/or TOPS Tech course requirements, and meet several other performance requirements.

The proposal would also add one or two lower level diplomas. The “Provisional Diploma Option” would award a diploma to students who complete 23 Carnegie units of courses, meet the course requirements for graduation, fail one or more parts of the GEE 21, and have passed the eighth grade “high stakes” LEAP 21 test.

The last option was tentatively labeled a “Skills Diploma” and has not been publicly released. This option has been identified as being primarily for special education students, but it may be available for some regular education students. This option could award some form of certificate or diploma to students who complete specific course requirements but fail to pass either the LEAP 21 eighth grade test or the GEE 21.

It is unclear how or if the proposed diploma options would be incorporated into the accountability program. The endorsement options would not likely have a negative impact. However, if schools were rewarded in their SPS scores by counting lower-than-standard diplomas or certificates in their graduation rates, the proposal could be viewed as a major weakening of the accountability program.

### High School SPS Formula

A proposal not approved at BESE’s December meeting could be resurrected. This proposal was to change the formula for calculating school performance scores (SPS) for high schools by reducing the weight given testing from 90% to 70% and making a new (but yet undefined) graduation rate 20% of the score. The proposal could be considered again after BESE debates other diploma options.

## Threats to Program Implementation

Potential threats to the full implementation of the accountability program include legal challenges, reactions to the new graduation exit exam, reactions to implementation of local school choice policy plans, funding problems and teacher job actions.

### Legal Challenges

Several lawsuits have been filed in federal and state court to block or delay implementation of the fourth and eighth grade “high stakes” testing policy. The complainants are groups primarily based in the New Orleans area, including Parents for Educational Justice and Parents Against Testing Before Teaching. To date, the courts have ruled in favor of the state and the “high stakes” testing program.

Having failed initially in the courts, Parents for Educational Justice filed a civil rights complaint with the U. S. Department of Education, charging that “high stakes” testing has a disproportionate impact on poor and minority children. This is the fifth investigation of alleged civil rights violations stemming from statewide tests. The other four (North Carolina, Texas, Ohio and Nevada) were settled voluntarily with the states committing to taking steps to help students who have trouble passing the exams, such as providing summer school and accelerated programs. However, the agreements did not require those states to stop using the exams. Louisiana has already implemented statewide summer school programs.

Legal challenges remain a potential, although not imminent, threat to the accountability program.



## Reaction to the New Graduation Exit Exam

When the state's 10th graders take the new and more difficult graduation exit exam (GEE 21) for the first time this spring, the failure rate is expected to be much higher than for the old exam. The DOE has estimated that 35% of the students taking the Math exam for the first time will fail, compared to 25% for the old Math exam. For English, the failure rate is estimated at 28%, compared to 20% on the old test. A high failure rate on the new exam could provoke a public reaction and fuel further demands to ease the policy.

In 1984, BESE adopted a policy requiring passage of a graduation exit exam (GEE) to receive a diploma from a public high school. After seven years of debates, interference, funding problems, and political and public outcry, the exit exam was finally given to the class of 1991.



To pass the original GEE, the student had to perform at an eighth grade level. But the new exam requires students to function at the 10th grade level. GEE 21 includes four tests: Math, English/Language Arts, Science and Social Studies. Tenth-graders will take the Math and English/Language Arts tests this year and, as 11th graders next year, will take the Science and Social Sciences tests.

Students have five opportunities to pass the English Arts and Math components and three opportunities to pass the Science and Social Studies components and still graduate on time. Students must only retake the parts they fail, and may continue to take the tests after completing the other graduation requirements and leaving high school.



Students in the class of 2003 will only be required to pass the Math and English/Language Arts components to graduate. Subsequent classes will be required to pass the Math, English/

Language Arts, and *either* the Science or Social Studies tests. Considering the increased difficulty of the new exam, the accountability program is probably not being compromised by requiring passage of fewer components for graduation.

## Deletion of the Approaching Basic Category

Another critical point in terms of its potential to arouse parental resistance is the plan to raise the passing score on the LEAP 21 tests in 2004. Removing the "Approaching Basic" category will require students to perform at the "Basic" level in order to pass the tests. It is imperative that the educational standards be well developed and clarified well in advance. To stave off efforts to lower passing scores, it will be necessary to show that the standards are well integrated into the curricula and that students are being taught the material on which they will be tested.

## Local Implementation of Public School Choice Plans

Students in "Academically Unacceptable" schools in Level II Corrective Action are eligible to be transferred, at their parent's request, to the nearest acceptable public school under certain conditions. Several schools will likely be in this category for the next school year.

Several school districts have already begun developing transfer plans in case they are needed. The Orleans Parish School District is receiving assistance from the DOE in developing its transfer plan. The Orleans Parish School Board has requested a waiver to the provision allowing transfers to schools across district lines if no "Academically Acceptable" school in the district is available. The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board has asked for a waiver from developing a school choice plan because of the desegregation order. BESE has not approved either waiver request.

The transfer provision could easily run into difficulties. In some cases, there may be many students eligible to transfer, but few vacancies at other schools. In addition, school districts will likely be reluctant to accept students from neighboring districts because they will also have limited space and the local share of student funding will not follow the student. Also, notifying parents of eligibility for a transfer (or rather the failure to notify) has created problems in other states and could also be a problem here.

School attendance zones and school enrollment caps created under desegregation court orders might provide additional complications.

### Funding

The governor’s 2001-2002 Executive Budget recommends a funding level of \$61.2 million in state general funds for the “School Accountability and Improvement Program.” This program provides funding for specific aspects of the state’s accountability program, but it also includes funding for related programs such as charter schools, K-3 Reading and Math Initiative, and curriculum enhancement activities. Major proposed changes from the current year’s budget affecting the accountability program include almost \$26 million in additional funding for the following:

Rewards Component of School and District Accountability Initiative	\$10.0 million
High Stakes Remediation and LEAP 21 Tutoring	\$5.6 million
Summer School for GEE 21	\$3.0 million
School Improvement Grants to \$750,000 High Schools for First Year of Implementation	
Testing Component of Accountability Initiative	\$3.9 million
13 Additional K-8 Distinguished Educators (DE) and 10 High School Pilot DEs	\$2.6 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$26.0 million</b>

At the end of 2001, School Performance Scores will be released for all of the state’s public schools. For elementary and middle schools, the first accountability cycle will end and new growth targets assigned. “Academically Unacceptable” schools that fail to score above 30 will be placed in Corrective Action Level II. In addition, other schools will be placed in Corrective Action Level I if they fail to meet their current growth targets. High schools labeled “Academically Unacceptable” will also be placed in Corrective Action Level I. Additional support and assistance is supposed to be provided to schools in corrective action. With more schools in corrective action for the next fiscal year, the state will have to fund Distinguished Educators for K-8 schools in Corrective Action Level II, fund a pilot program for Distinguished Educators to be placed in academically unacceptable high schools, and provide other resources to assist schools in developing and implementing plans to increase student achievement. The accountability program also calls for rewards for schools that meet or surpass their Growth Targets.

The Accountability Program also requires school districts to adopt or implement programs needed to improve student achievement. These programs require funding that many poorly funded school districts do not have. The additional programs may include:

- Training programs for teachers in poorly performing schools
- Curriculum reviews to align them with state standards
- After school, Saturday, and summer remediation programs
- Alternative programs (pre-GED/Skills Program)
- Recruitment of high quality teachers
- Technology improvements

Holding schools accountable for student achievement but not giving them additional support and assistance to help them improve could threaten the existence of the entire plan.

Another growing threat to the accountability program is the possibility that teacher job actions, such as walkouts or sickouts, in pressing for pay increases could interrupt the scheduled spring LEAP testing. If the governor cannot adequately mollify teachers with a plan to fund pay raises in

the 2001-02 budget, the actions could continue into spring. This might give parents ammunition to argue that their fourth and eighth grade children were not adequately prepared for the “high stakes” tests.

## Accountability in Orleans Parish

PAR’s monitoring project places a special emphasis on following the implementation of the accountability system in New Orleans. Orleans Parish will undoubtedly provide the strongest test of the state’s accountability program and offer

the stiffest resistance to its implementation. The consequences of “high stakes” testing will likely bear heavily on this district’s large number of at-risk students. In order to make any meaningful improvement in the educational level of the state as a whole, it is imperative that progress be made in the low-performing schools in New Orleans.

Early on, the Orleans Parish School Board attempted to block a BESE requirement that it identify the parish’s lowest performing schools, a

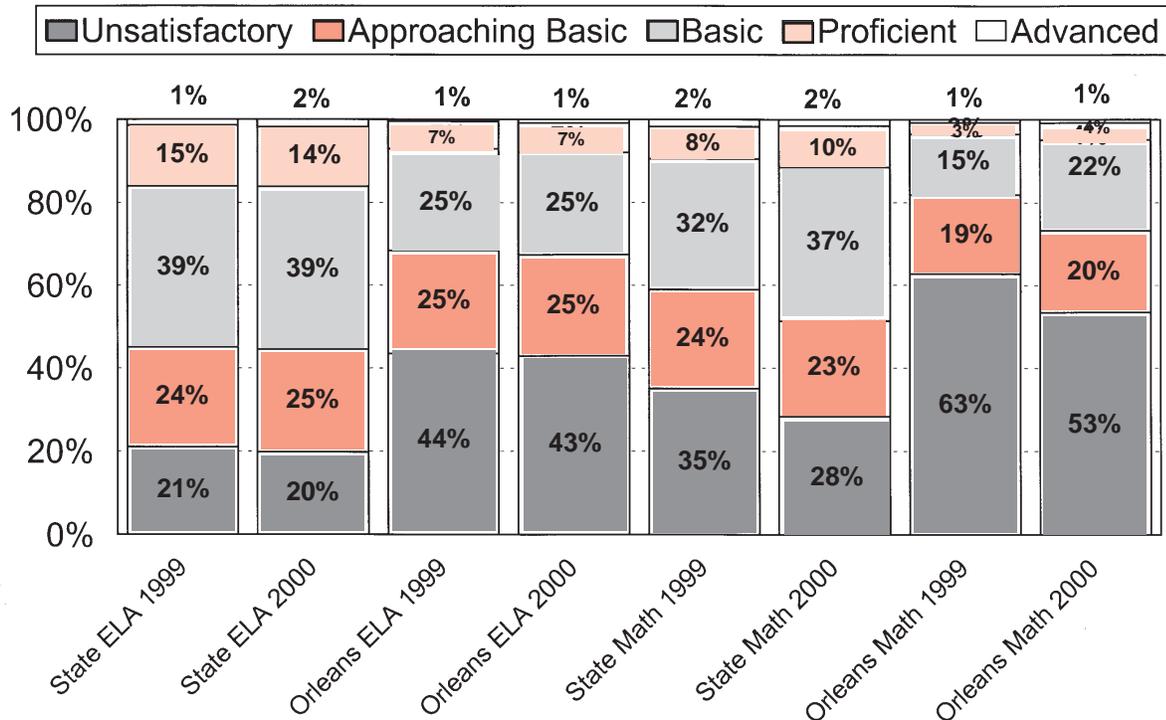
**TABLE 2**  
**Improvement in Orleans Parish School Performance Scores**  
**(Number and Percent of Schools Placed in Each Category)**

School Performance Label	1999 Regular Education Students (1)		1999 All Students (1)		2000 All Students (2)	
	State	Orleans	State	Orleans	State	Orleans
School of Academic Excellence	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	0 (0%)
School of Academic Distinction	15 (1%)	1 (1%)	15 (1%)	1 (1%)	13 (1%)	1 (1%)
School of Academic Achievement	94 (8%)	5 (5%)	94 (8%)	5 (5%)	159 (14%)	8 (8%)
Academically Above State Average	522 (45%)	6 (6%)	506 (43%)	6 (6%)	446 (38%)	2 (2%)
Academically Below State Average	486 (42%)	40 (40%)	491 (42%)	33 (33%)	512 (44%)	52 (52%)
Academically Unacceptable School	53 (5%)	48 (48%)	64 (5%)	55 (55%)	42 (4%)	37 (37%)
Total	1,171 (100%)	100 (100%)	1,171 (100%)	100 (100%)	1,173 (100%)	100 (100%)

**NOTES:**

- (1) The School Performance Score calculation for 1999 (baseline year) included regular and special education students, but the School Performance Label was based on the score for regular education students only.
- (2) School Performance Labels will not be reassigned until the end of the first two-year cycle in 2001. This column indicates what the label would have been if 2000 data had been used.
- (3) Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## Figure 1 Comparison of Spring 1999 and Spring 2000 Fourth Grade LEAP 21 Test Results



**Note:** ELA denotes results on the English and Language Arts portion of the tests. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

precursor to the start of the accountability program. The board has also adopted a resolution condemning the state’s LEAP 21 “high stakes” testing policy. Even the New Orleans City Council joined in with a resolution opposing the testing policy. Furthermore, it was a New Orleans group that brought suit challenging the testing policy.

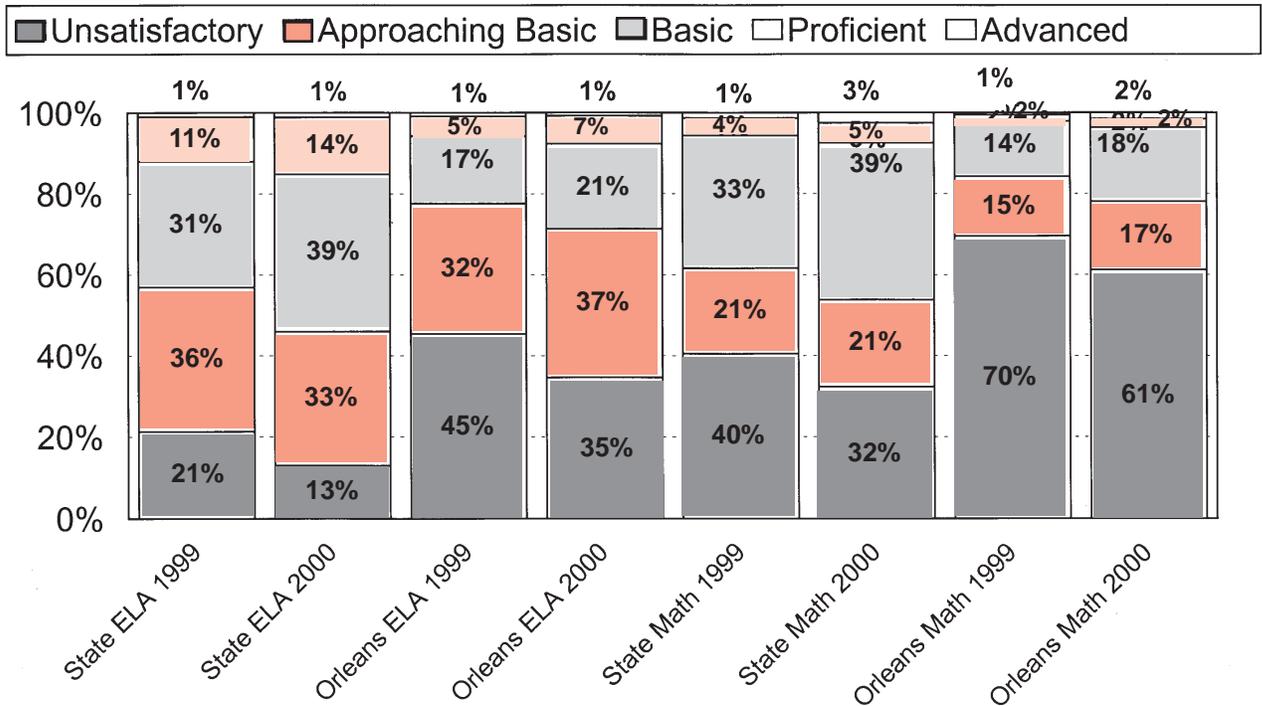
According to the latest Louisiana Department of Education data, of the 53 K-8 schools labeled “academically unacceptable” statewide in 1999, 48 were located in the Orleans Parish School District. These 48 schools comprised roughly half of the district’s K-8 schools. Another 40 of the district’s schools were labeled “academically below state average” leaving only 12 rated in the higher categories. (See Table 2).

The initial school labels were assigned using the School Performance Scores based on tests given in 1999. To be labeled “academically unacceptable,” a school had to score 30 or less on a point system that bestowed a “school of academic excellence” label for a score of 150 or above.

Although elected officials in the parish have demonstrated a lack of full support for the accountability program, there are early indications of some improvement in the parish’s schools. Test scores are improving and some schools have shown remarkable improvement.

As expected, Orleans Parish had the poorest results of any district on the spring 2000 LEAP 21 exams. However, it showed improvement over the previous year. (See Figure 1 and 2.) The parish’s

## Figure 2 Comparison of Spring 1999 and Spring 2000 Eighth Grade LEAP 21 Test Results



**Note:** ELA denotes results on the English and Language Arts portion of the tests. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

fourth-graders matched the small statewide improvement in the English/Language Arts portion but still with twice the failure rate (43%). On the Math portion, Orleans' fourth-graders made significant improvement, with their failure rate falling from 63% to 53%. The parish's eighth-graders exceeded the statewide improvement in both English and Math, but again with one of the highest failure rates of 35% and 61% respectively.

After the first year of the accountability program, School Performance Scores for Orleans Parish schools improved with the average school score increasing from 38.4 in 1999 to 44.7 in 2000, an average increase of 6.3 points. Notably,

two "Academically Unacceptable" schools in the parish increased their scores by over 40 points. McDonogh #07 Elementary School ranked first and Robert R. Moton Elementary School ranked third with the highest score increases in the state.

In the first year, 18 of 55 schools that originally scored in the "academically unacceptable" category (when special education students were included) raised their test scores sufficiently to lose that label. However, the school scores are figured on a two-year cycle and new labels will not be assigned until this year's test scores are calculated. Table 2 shows how the parish's schools would have been labeled if the 2000 scores had been used.

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A recent *Times Picayune* editorial warned that, “one year does not make a trend” but concluded that, while there was still a long way to go, the city schools have made a dramatic change from two years ago.

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## Conclusion

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Student performance improvements from the 1999 to the 2000 tests suggest that the accountability program is working and should be continued. It is too early to tell how successful the program is, but the initial results are encouraging. The fact that several outside organizations have given the program high marks suggests that Louisiana has become a national leader in accountability.

Louisiana’s academic standards in some areas have been cited by national reviewers as needing improvement. Teachers need clear guidance on what students are expected to know at each grade level so that curricula can be aligned with the standards. In addition, the standards need to be constantly reviewed to ensure that they are aligned with the state’s assessment or testing program.

Most of the changes made to the accountability program since its inception have generally been improvements. The major changes, and the most controversial, are those that have altered the stringent consequences of “high stakes” testing originally designed to end social promotion at the fourth- and eighth-grade level.

Allowing students who fail the fourth grade a second time to move on probably reflects a reality that repeating for a third year would be counterproductive at this level for most students.

The new eighth grade LEAP 21 “high stakes” testing policy, now in the process of being formally adopted, adds flexibility to the accountability program. It is a fact that some special education students will never learn the material and pass the test. But it is more difficult to accept as a fact that some regular

education students will not meet the low standard of passing the tests at the “Approaching Basic” or above level, even with remediation. The policy allows some students to progress to the next grade who are still well below grade level in Math or English/Language Arts. The compromise policy adopted by BESE gives such students options other than remaining in the eighth grade until they drop out. Although not perfect, the new policy, if carefully implemented, offers an acceptable solution to a difficult problem.

The planned pre-GED/Skills Option Program still needs to be fleshed out. A primary concern is that the program not be structured in such a way as to become a dumping ground for low achieving students. The skills training must be designed to adequately prepare students to become productive citizens.

BESE delayed action on high school diploma options until later in 2001. The idea of enhanced diplomas, recognizing extra effort and higher achievement, is commendable. However, the proposal to grant a less-than-standard diploma will meet justifiable resistance.

Funding could be a problem in making accountability work. Remedial classes, summer school and alternative programs such as pre-GED/Skills Option, will need additional resources.

While accountability has gotten off to a rocky start in New Orleans, early results indicate that significant improvements can be expected. Unfortunately, the school board and many parents do not yet appear to be completely on board with the reform effort.

Louisiana has developed a good program that will continue to require minor adjustments as new elements of the plan are implemented and problems arise. Great care must be exercised in making any policy changes to assure that the basic premise of the reform effort is not undermined. If the schools and their students are to be held truly accountable, they cannot be let off the hook whenever they begin to feel the consequences of their failures. Major policy changes should be resisted to give the program an opportunity to prove itself. At the same, common sense must not be discarded.



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4664 Jamestown Avenue, Suite 300  
P.O. Box 14776  
Baton Rouge, LA 70898-4776  
Phone: (225) 926-8414  
Fax: (225) 926-8417  
E-mail: [staff@la-par.com](mailto:staff@la-par.com)  
or [jimbrandt@la-par.com](mailto:jimbrandt@la-par.com)  
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