Acadiana area times to lower Morning Advocate 1/2/1992

By BOBBY ARDOIN

OPELOUSAS - High school graduation rates in Acadiana reflect the state average, but are still too low, six parish school superintendents said recently.

Slightly more than 60 percent of the students who enter the grade nine finish high school in the seven-parish Acadiana area, said the superintendents.

Superintendents from Iberia, Lafayette, Vermilion, St. Martin, Evangeline and Acadiana parishes said how their parishes are attempting to halt the high school dropout trends.

Vermilion Parish Superintendent Dan Darst added several years ago his parish had one of the worst dropout rates.

Darst said the Vermilion Parish school system has implemented an alternative middle school program after officials realized the majority of their high school students were graduating.

"At one time it (graduation rate) was in the low 60s," percent, he said.

Darst said the system identified students at the seventh grade level who had been retained at least two years. These students were allowed to make up any work before ever being prepared for high school, he said.

Vermilion Parish also has an accelerated program for students who are retained at kindergarten levels, Darst added.

Instead of retaining the students in kindergarten, they are identified and teachers attempt to improve basic academic skills during first- and second-grade levels, he said.

Vermilion Parish students who may become potential dropouts after they enter high school are then channeled into a pre-Graduation Equivalency Diploma program, he said.

"Retaining kids year after year does work," Darst said. "We are working with kids at each level and our dropout rate has shown progress."

Lafayette Parish Superintendent Larry Broussard said his parish board members approved a $30,000 appropriation for dropout prevention programs, but these programs have difficulty dealing with students who have dyslexia and attention deficiency disorders.

"We found a lot of our dropouts and potential dropouts were leaving because they had learning problems," Broussard said.

"Older teachers didn't have much training in the handling of students with dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, but you have to have a lot of knowledge about the matter," he said.

St. Martin Parish Superintendent Roland Chevaller said the dropout rate in his parish was in line with the rest of the state. He was graduating just above 60 percent of our ninth graders, but that figure is too low.

"We have a parish at-risk committee which looks at attendance. Usually those with infrequent attendance are at-

Chevaller said the committee includes parents of students who have the ability to learn, but learns maybe in a different way than the traditional classroom structure," he said.

St. Martin Parish, Chevaller said, has also begun a peer tutoring system at the junior and high school level.

Peer tutoring method has used group learning in the formal classroom setting in addition to one-on-one tutoring, he said.

In St. Martin middle schools, Chevaller said potential high school dropouts were screened at the sixth- grade level.

"We see a potential dropout as one who is in his second year of middle school.

"What do we do with these students is try to bring them up to their grade level by giving them extra help to make them all accomplish them to do three years worth of academics in two years," Chevaller said.

Lafayette Parish has established several programs aimed at curbing the dropout rate, said Assistant Superintendent Andrew Darst.

Students at three St. Landry junior high schools and one high school attend a curriculum subjects (math, science and language arts) and then take trade school courses during the afternoon.

Darst said high school students attending Northwest Vocational School are allowed to participate in a pre-GED program, he said.

In Eunice, the Adult Education and Alternative Center is a daytime school which allows high school dropouts to complete their education by studying to pass the GED, Darst said.

"The Eunice center is for students who found they didn't want to attend school in the regular setting, but who still want to complete requirements for their GED diploma," said Darst.

St. Landry Parish has high school principals and staffs who work on school improvement plans, but these programs have little effect on the dropout rate, Darst said.

The school improvement plans address test improvement, although some programs do not help students to stay in the regular school setting and get diplomas," said Darst.

Lafayette Parish Supervisor Max Skidmore said 40 percent of the students in his parish don't graduate after four years.

"Our percentage of dropouts is fairly consistent with the area parishes and the state as a whole," he said.

Lafayette Parish, Skidmore said, needs "more technology, classrooms and equipment to help keep our kids in school," he said.

He said part of his plan for lowering the dropout rate is tied to a sales tax proposal that will be placed before Lafayette Parish voters on Jan. 18.

"We plan to use the tax money to get computers, build more classrooms and help offer more vocational education classes in the public schools," Skidmore said.