Report cards show problems at inner city schools

With the exception of urban “magnet schools,” report cards issued by the state last week for East Baton Rouge Parish schools show low achievement test scores and high suspension and expulsion rates in the system’s black inner city schools.

The Louisiana Progress Profiles for the School Year 1989-1990 shows that overall, parish schools generally exceed the state average in most categories, but remain well below national averages for the California Achievement Tests that are administered to fourth-, sixth- and ninth-graders.

All four magnet schools — Baton Rouge High, Scotlandville High, Istrouma Middle and McKinley Middle — easily exceeded the national average on the achievement tests.

School Board member Press Robinson, whose district includes a sizeable share of inner-city schools, said the fact that magnet schools are excelling — and other inner-city schools are faring poorly — should not come as surprise to anyone.

“The magnet schools get the cream of the crop when it comes to students, teachers and other resources,” Robinson said. “What I’ve been trying to do over the past five years is to place more of those resources where they’re needed.”

Chances are that students in magnet schools and gifted programs are going to excel anyway, he said, noting that many of those resources might be better used to motivate youngsters in the inner-city schools whose academic achievement is problematic at best.

The state progress report leaves no doubt that the magnet schools and the gifted programs are providing an exciting environment for the best and brightest. The report cards are especially impressive for magnet schools in the California Achievement Test, where they soar above the national average.

Schools offering gifted/talented programs, particularly for the fourth-graders who were tested, also tended to place a large percentage of students in the top 25 percent nationally.

Schools with gifted programs include Audubon, Bernard Terrace, Buchanan, Greenville, LaSalle, Mayfair, Westminster, Brownsfield and Park Ridge elementaries; McKinley, Istrouma and Sherwood middle schools; and McKinley High.

School spokesman Bob Neese said the fluctuation among test scores at elementaries with gifted programs is probably because some schools only have two gifted classes, while others may have half their student body enrolled in the gifted/talented program.

Neese noted that some of the schools with gifted programs have a low percentage of certified teachers because the state has additional requirements for those who teach the gifted.

Especially in schools with relatively new gifted programs, the teachers may still be in the process of obtaining certification to teach...
gifted classes, even though they may already be certified to teach in conventional classrooms.

While magnet and gifted programs account for the high test scores, most of the low scores come from inner-city schools with predominantly black enrollments.

At Banks Elementary, 72.5 percent of the fourth-graders tested last year scored low enough to be classified in the bottom 25 percent nationally. None of the fourth-graders tested at Banks — which is 96 percent black — scored high enough on the test to be classified in the top 25 percent of students tested nationally.

Of the seven elementary schools that failed to place a single student in the top 25 percent nationally on the California Achievement Test, five were inner-city schools with a black enrollment of 95 percent or more.

Another, Howell Park, had an 80 percent black enrollment while the seventh, Highland, has 60 percent white enrollment. The other five were Banks, Crestworth, Dalton, Delmont and Dufrocq.

All five of the elementaries that placed 50 percent or more in the bottom 25 percent nationally on the California Achievement Test were inner-city schools with black enrollment accounting for at least 90 percent of their total enrollment. Those schools were Banks, Crestworth, Dalton, Dufrocq and Nicholson.

For the most part, suspensions at the elementary level were a far cry from the middle and high schools, with only 16 elementaries suspending 3 percent or more of their students last year.

Not surprisingly, the two top middle schools in the parish in terms of test scores, attendance rates, low suspensions and low expulsions were Istrouma Middle and McKinley Middle, two magnet schools that also offer gifted programs.

McKinley had the highest test scores, with 62.8 percent of its sixth-graders placing among the top 25 percent in the country. Istrouma Middle had 49.6 percent of its sixth-graders falling into that category.

Only 1.2 percent of the sixth-graders at McKinley and 0.8 percent of those at Istrouma Middle placed in the bottom 25 percent of U.S. middle-school students who took the California Achievement Test last year.

Another middle school with high test scores was Sherwood Middle, which has a gifted program and had 40.1 percent of its sixth-graders place in the top 25 percent nationally.

At the other end of the spectrum, three of the five middle schools with the least students placing in the top 25 percent nationally and the most in the bottom 25 percent were inner-city schools with predominantly black populations. The other two were Scotlandville Middle, an inner-city school with a 48 percent black enrollment, and Westdale Middle, a central Baton Rouge school that is two-thirds black.

The two middle magnet schools had the lowest suspension and expulsion rates, while an inner-city, predominantly black middle school had the highest suspension and expulsion rates. Glen Oaks Middle led parish middle schools by suspending 35.8 percent of its students and expelling 6.5 percent last year.

Inner-city, predominantly black schools were at the high end of the parish scale in terms of suspensions and expulsions, but they were by no means at the top. The high school with the highest percentage of students suspended last year was Tara High (28.6 percent), followed by Robert E. Lee High (27.4 percent) and Broadmoor High (27.3 percent).

The high schools that expelled the highest percentage of students last year were Broadmoor High (2.7 percent), Tara High (2.3 percent) and Baker High (2.1 percent).

According to figures released by the school system, black males accounted for 76 percent of the suspensions last year and 70 percent of the expulsions.