Tribal school grows test scores, exceeds 2014 goal

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The Chitimacha Tribal School has done something many Louisiana schools only dream of doing.

Louisiana’s School Accountability System says each school must progress yearly to meet the state’s school performance score goal of 120.0 by 2014.

The Chitimacha Tribal School got 120.8 this past school year, St. Mary Parish School Board accountability manager Kevin Derise said.

The tiny school with only 83 students is one of the highest achieving schools in St. Mary Parish.

At the K-8 school, students work on everything from mastering basic arithmetic to cultivating skills for speaking the Chitimacha’s recovering language.

“Looking at just their standardized test scores, they are one of the higher performing schools in the district,” Derise said “The numbers don’t lie.”

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Quick facts
- The Chitimacha Day School was founded in 1934.
- The Chitimacha Day School became the Chitimacha Tribal School in 1991.
- School colors are red, black and yellow. They are tribal colors.
- The school mascot is the eagle.

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Chitimacha Tribal School officials attribute the school’s progress to its small student-teacher ratio, determination and consistency in teaching.

A key ingredient to the school’s success has been reinforcing basic knowledge of math, reading and writing. officials attribute the school’s progress to its small student-teacher ratio, forcing basic school’s success to the teacher ratio, and consistency determination.

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School Principal Tanya Rosamond.

"We saw that we really needed to give our students the basics," she said.

Staying accountable

Real success boils down to what’s happen in the class-

room, Rosamond said. The good news for them is that it’s typically been a high score," she said. In 2001, the school had an SPS of 79.9, he said. That number jumped nearly 42 points during a six-year period.

The school’s students take the LEAP and LEAP tests just like other Louisiana students. The Chitimacha Tribal School scores are not official, because it is not a public school, Derise said.

The St. Mary Parish School System has no authority over the tribal school, Rosamond said.

Even though Derise works for the St. Mary Parish School System, he acts as the Chitimacha Tribal School’s external auditor.

The tribal school reports to and receives some funding from the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, Rosamond said. The bureau, in turn, mandates that all of its 185 American Indian schools use their state’s assessment system to measure academic progress.

Under No Child Left Behind legislation, schools all across the U.S. must show yearly academic improvements. Derise said he plugs the school’s standardized tests scores into the state’s accountability formula to figure out how its students are performing academically. He computes its school performance score so that it can stay in compliance with the Bureau of Indian Affairs accountability standards.

"You still have to be accountable," Rosamond said.

Culture in the curriculum

An education at the Chitimacha Tribal School is more than learning basic read-

ing and math skills for students such Rhett LeBlanc, 12.

"I like it because we have stuff that a lot of schools don’t have," he said. "I like that we are an Indian school."

Unlike thousands of public schools across the nation, where the curriculum and history textbooks are Anglo-based, the school’s students are introduced to their own history by Chitimacha tribal leaders and teachers who spend time researching it, said Molly Chaisson, the school’s program coordinator and teacher.

"It’s a history with roots firmly planted in South Louisiana, where the tribe settled around 500 A.D., according to the Sovereign Nation of the Chitimacha Web site."

The Chitimacha lost land, language and even pieces of their culture at the hands of the French, Spanish and the United States.

Chaisson, who is the school’s only Chitimacha teacher, said the Chitimacha are reclaiming their land, culture and language and passing it on to Chitimacha children.

"You see little bits and pieces of that heritage woven in," she said.

LeBlanc said he enjoys learning the Chitimacha language. The sixth-grader can say dog (kix), cat (ghulka), good morning (gaxiti) and very good (huygikix) in Chitimacha.

"Being Indian is pretty awesome, that’s all I gotta say," LeBlanc said.

Life after eighth grade

The Chitimacha Tribal School will graduate a class of 12 eighth-graders this year, Rosamond said.

There is no high school on the reservation, so students have to continue their education at West St. Mary High School, Hanson Memorial High School in Oklahoma, Sequoyah Indian High School, an off-Reservation, American Indian boarding school in Oklahoma, she said.

"The majority of our eighth-graders are just ready to move on," Rosamond said. "And that’s good."

She said she sees more students graduating high school and moving on to jobs or college.

"I don’t feel that they will have much of a transition when they go to high school," Chaisson said.

But some Chitimacha students have a difficult time coping with public school life.

"I know that when these kids get into the public school system, when they are not understanding a concept, it’s intimidating for them for them to raise their hand," she said.

But students will succeed if they want to, Rosamond said.

"If they don’t, I don’t think you can blame the tribal school," she said.