Breaux Bridge Elementary students break state test barrier

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BREAUX BRIDGE — Breaux Bridge Elementary School is surrounded by five low-income housing projects. Eighty-five percent of its 530 students are on the free or reduced lunch program. The student body is 70 percent minority. Everything about the school says failure, at-risk, low achievement.

Everything except the test scores. Pick any standardized test — Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program test — and the students here outperformed every school in St. Martin Parish and most schools in Lafayette Parish this year.

This performance belies the stereotypes, says principal Alvin Jones, and that's what he and his faculty concentrate on.

"We've broken the barrier," Jones says. "Everything in America says we're not supposed to be achieving this high. Poverty is not a reason for low achievement."

His philosophy is simple: empower the teachers, then get out of their way and let them teach. They use the basic state curriculum guide, concentrate on the skills it contains and work hard. A normal, basic approach.

But the difference, Jones says, is that his faculty teaches as if every student were in an accelerated program. Teachers are divided into three cadres, and each meets at least twice a month to exchange ideas, teaching methods and problems.

"That's what brings the faculty closer together," says the school's curriculum coordinator, Betty John, who has been at the school for 27 years. "They talk a lot about what we can do to improve the school and the test scores, and Mr. Jones listens to their recommendations. We are a very closely knit faculty, and he helps us a lot."

Jones is from a family of career educators. His grandmother was the first African-American and first female principal in St. Martin Parish many years ago. His mother was a teacher also. So some of his ideas are basic, but they are all tinged with his enthusiasm and love for the students.

Five years before the parish had a Saturday detention program, Jones was at the school every Saturday morning for his own detention program. No problem getting the kids' parents to bring them, because the alternative was suspension, and he did it to keep from having to suspend students.

"Treat the kids like they can learn and teach like they can learn," he said. "Hidden in each one is something they like. You don't leave here each day not being tired — you wrestle with it every day."

The halls are quiet now and the classrooms are empty. A few kids are in the halls, mostly children of teachers who are getting their classrooms ready for next year.

"Jacorey!" Jones calls out, and a fourth-grader marches in from the hall. "What's the school's mission statement?"

"Breaux Bridge Elementary is a school that respects individual differences while setting and achieving high academic goals, including social skills and parenting skills, to promote growth in a positive learning environment so that children can function in society effectively," Jacorey Guidry says without hesitation, as quickly as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Thank you, Jacorey," Jones says as the youngster leaves. "All our students can do that. We live by that and by our motto: 'Not as good as, but better than.'"

Again, the test scores prove the point. Jacorey and the other fourth-graders scored more than 3 percentile points higher than the parish average, outdistancing other parish students in all seven areas tested. The sixth-graders scored more than 6 percentile points higher than the parish average.

On the LEAP test, the fifth-graders scored higher than the average in St. Martin and Lafayette parishes as well as the state average in both language arts and mathematics.