Ascension, Lafayette and St. James parishes are three of only 10 school districts in Louisiana with all schools accredited by a strict, federally recognized academic organization founded more than a century ago.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accredits all the schools in the three parishes, said Robert Wayne Strain, state director of the Louisiana State Committee of Secondary and Middle Schools Commission.

Six parishes in the state have no schools accredited by the SACS, including Acadia and East Feliciana parishes, Strain said.

East Baton Rouge Parish and Livingston parishes fall somewhere in between the two extremes, with some schools accredited, SACS Associate Executive Director Mark Elgart said Tuesday.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, only the 17 high schools are accredited, while the middle and high schools in Livingston Parish are accredited SACS schools. None of either parish’s elementary schools is accredited, Elgart said.

“There are some schools in the state accredited by the state Department of Education, but (they) can’t meet our standards,” Strain said.

The SACS was formed in 1895 to help improve education in 11 Southern states: Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

Elgart said there are six regional academic accreditation organizations around the nation that are recognized by the federal government. The SACS is one of those six organizations.

“It’s important because we are talking about schools recognized for academic excellence. The industry standard, so to speak,” Elgart said when asked about the importance of being accredited by the SACS.

As an example, Elgart said that colleges and universities not accredited by the SACS could not participate in federal loan and grant programs.

Although it does not happen in Louisiana, some colleges — Florida is an example — will not accept high school students as freshmen unless they graduated from a SACS-approved school, Strain said. “In 1998, 93 percent of the freshmen at LSU graduated from SACS-accredited schools,” Strain said.

Ascension’s school district has been accredited since 1990, but Lafayette and St. James parishes’ SACS histories go back further, Elgart said. Lafayette Parish has had all of its schools accredited since 1975, while St. James Parish has been accredited since 1979.

“I know St. James has had problems recently, but the school system itself is becoming a better school system trying to pull itself up,” Strain said, referring to recent protests by St. James parents about personnel changes in the last year.

Elgart said schools have to apply for accreditation once a year. School personnel do their own evaluations and send them in to SACS headquarters in Decatur, Ga. Then, a site team from SACS visits each accredited school every five years to perform a peer review as a follow-up to each school’s evaluation.

“What we look at is academic areas, the curriculum, teacher-to-pupil ratios, facilities, instruction materials, school improvement plans. The whole gamut,” Strain said.

There are 180 different standards that schools must meet in order to be accredited by the SACS, Strain said.

“All of this assures quality in the schools, and the standards are tougher than the state’s accreditation process,” Strain said. “That’s important, and it shows excellence in schools not just around the state but around the country. It’s quite an accomplishment.”

The other seven parishes with all schools accredited by the SACS are Calcasieu, Ouachita, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. Tammany and Winn. The other four Louisiana parishes without any schools accredited are East and West Carroll, Lincoln and Catahoula.

Strain said he knows that a couple of those parishes, Lincoln and East Feliciana, have had some of their schools accredited by the SACS in the past.