FRESHMEN

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FRESHMEN high school get results

By DJ FUTCH

River Parish bureau

The Livingston Parish school system was facing a serious crunch in 1999, with nearly 2000 students crammed into Denham Springs High School. Out of necessity, said Superintendent John Watson, they converted a middle school campus into a freshman-only high school and repeated the process a few years later with Walker High.

Also in 1999, and 50 miles southeast, Debbie Schum, then principal at East St. John High School in Reserve, made a similar move with her freshman class, but with the goal of raising standardized test scores.

"It wasn’t a separate campus, it was a group of trailers at first," Schum laughed. "but something about giving freshmen their own space created a family environment, she said.

"They had their own identity, rather than being lumped in with a crowd of three other grades," she said. "It’s like taking high school a bite at a time."

Those days, districts in areas of high population growth are taking lessons from both examples. By building standalone freshman academies, officials say, they can stretch classroom capacity while boosting academic performance.

Schum, now deputy superintendent for the Louisiana Department of Education’s Office of College and Career Readiness, said a growing number of school districts in the state — 40 of about 70 — have been carving out classroom wings designated only for their freshman classes, assigning designated teachers, recruiting older student mentors, and otherwise guiding the freshman students’ transition from middle school to young adulthood.

Schum said there’s a lot of data to show the concept works, provided it’s well-implemented.

Source: Walker and Zachary school systems, Louisiana Department of Education

Advocate graphic

Zachary High School students exit Foundation Hall, home of the school’s freshman academy, at the end of the school day on Feb. 2 in Zachary The Zachary Community School Board opened this $5 million facility for its freshman class in October.

School districts creating separate space to assist transition to high school

By CL FUTCH

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Advocate graphic
Blaise Bergeron, seated right, chats Tuesday with classmate Tonaia Brown, second from left, while freshman English teacher Kadee Dupuis, standing, helps students Logan Marchand, left, and Kristina Fontenot at St. Amant High School. Dupuis also runs Gator 2 Gator, a program that trains older students to mentor freshmen as part of the freshman academy.