Getting back on track

Attempt to improve Donaldsonville school becomes model plan

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DONALDSONVILLE — Eighth-grade students at Lowery Middle School spent a recent Friday afternoon listening to reggae rhythms and the Jamaican accents of rocker Bob Marley chanting lyrics about war and inequality.

The class was listening to Marley's "War," but the music was no break or reward for the students.

"Now, I want you to write down 10 words that you can think of while listening to this song. Tell me what you are getting from the lyrics," said social studies teacher Everett Joshua.

The focus of Joshua's task was neither Marley nor the history of reggae music. Instead, Joshua was teaching his students about Africa, the slave trade and how people of different races are treated.

"You know this is not easy," Joshua said. "You can't do this every day. It's an ongoing process of trying to get the kids to learn in different ways."

Students at Lowery probably never would have had a chance to hear Marley's voice in a classroom before last year. That's when Lowery scored lower than any other school in Ascension Parish when the Louisiana Department of Education began its School and District Accountability System.

Legislators created the accountability program in 1998 to monitor the progress of public schools and to make sure the schools can meet state academic standards.

Lowery Middle School was not meeting those standards. The School Performance Scores — issued to all of Louisiana's kindergarten through eighth-grade schools in September 1999

Susan Ayenne, standing in the hallway of Lowery Middle School in Donaldsonville, is working with administrators and students to improve marks the school received from the state's School and District Accountability System.

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- are based on four criteria. Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tests, Iowa Test scores, school attendance and drop-out rates.

Out of a possible high score of 150 or above, Lowery's grade was 125.6. That means Lowery rated "Academically Below Average." Any school that scored 30 or below would be considered an "Academically Unacceptable School."

The low score occurred last year. "Just wait until the scores come out this year," said Susan Ayenne, a "distinguished educator" with a doctorate in education who was sent on special assignment to Lowery last year by the state Department of Education.

Ayenne's mission is to work with a team put together by Ascension Parish School Superintendent Robert Coultre. To produce a school improvement plan to have Lowery considered a "School of Academic Distinction" in 10 years. Schools in that category score between 125 and 149 points.

The school's short-term goal is a score of 47.5 by 2001. LEAP and Iowa Test scores come back in May, and the new accountability scores for the schools this year will be released in September.

The improvement plan Ayenne and her team designed is an impressive one, officials with the state Department of Education said.

So impressive, that in January, when the plan was completed and sent to Baton Rouge, education officials asked if they could use Ascension's improvement plan as an example of what other schools may shoot for during upcoming staff training seminars this summer.

"We're going to use bits of the criteria in Lowery's improvement plan for the template we're trying to come up with," said Margaret Singer, section leader of the School Improvement Planning Section of the state Department of Education.

"It looks like a good plan, and we appreciate Lowery sharing their plan with us," she said.

Singer said Education Department officials also will use parts of other successful school improvement plans around the state.

Ayenne arrived at Lowery in October 1999, one month after the first accountability scores were released. Ayenne will stay at Lowery until June 2001. At that time, Ascension educators will be on their own and ready to implement the improvement plan without the state's help.

Ayenne and members of her team, which includes Ascension Parish school officials and parents, started interviewing students, teachers and administrators in October.

"I would sit in classrooms and observe. I would ask the teachers and the students what they thought about the school and if they were happy about how the school was run," Ayenne said.

The team compiled a list of five strengths, five weaknesses and five recommendations to address the weaknesses.

According to the team findings, the strengths of the school are: great concern for the welfare of students; a committed, hard-working faculty; a strong administrative team; an increase in expectations for students' academic performance and behavior; and an abundance of resources.

The team identified the school's five weaknesses as: minimal academic rigor; a lack of involvement in the school's approach to instruction; a lack of consistency in discipline; a lack of collaboration among teachers; and a lack of technology utilization.

Ayenne and her team wasted no time getting to work.

Ayenne, team members and members of the administration started meeting with teachers on a weekly basis for brainstorming sessions. Ayenne wanted to identify the greatest challenges facing teachers in trying to get through to the students.

Although accountability scores have not come out yet this year, Ayenne and Assistant Principals Gwen Boudreaux and Ronald Washington said they have seen improvements in the school that tell them their score will be higher this year.

"They have been amazing changes and an improvement of the atmosphere for teachers and students," Washington said.

Boudreaux, who was a teacher at Lowery before becoming an assistant principal, said the new approach to teaching makes her want to teach again.

"There's dedication here now from teachers and students that was not here before," Boudreaux said.

One of the most daunting challenges facing Lowery is raising students' LEAP and Iowa scores. Ayenne said that's easy if you can get teachers, some of whom have been teaching for 20 years or more, to teach differently.

"The high-stakes testing has multiple-choice, essay and short-answer questions," Ayenne said.

"You have to get rid of matching. There's no matching on the LEAP test. You have to get rid of fill-in-the-blank. There's no fill-in-the-blank on these tests. Get the kids used to what's on the tests, and there won't be problems," Ayenne said.

When Joshua, the eighth-grade social studies teacher, is not playing Bob Marley's music in class, Joshua puts on costumes to better portray and make more vivid the type of history he's teaching.

"I dressed up as a runaway slave once," Joshua said.

Lowery's seventh-grade math teacher, Judy Macheyon, had her students building geometric objects with Gummie Bears and straws during one recent class.

"Elsewhere in Lowery, seventh-grade geography teacher Patricia Lasa was instructing her students on preparing projects on Africa. Some of the students were writing reports on certain regions of the continent, while others were making their own maps and art depicting Africa.

"It's unbelievable how things have changed," Ayenne said. "We have students going on field trips to cemeteries, students traveling to other schools to read with other students. One teacher had students outside blowing bubbles and then talking to them about the shapes and getting them to write about what they saw."

Washington said he now sees teachers getting students to think critically.

"Teachers give them problems to work out verbally. They tell the students to visualize and think about the problem and try to come up with ideas about how to solve them," Washington said.

Donald Songy, assistant superintendent of Ascension Parish schools, said he is proud of what Ayenne and her team have accomplished.

"We're looking forward to the test scores when they come out in September," Songy said.

Linda Johnson, the member of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education who represents the West Bank of Ascension Parish, said Lowery seems to be on the right track.

"I applaud them for what they have done," Johnson said. "It sounds like they have taken a negative situation and turned it into something that's going to be positive."