High scores in Union Parish: Why?

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

The second- and third-graders who scored highest on the state’s minimum skills tests are enrolled in school systems that expect a lot more than the minimum from their students.

Interviews with superintendents from six school systems that performed well on the tests revealed a pattern of high local standards that were established long before the Department of Education set statewide minimum standards for student achievement.

One school official in a parish with a high passing rate said flatly that the state tests are too easy to determine whether a student is ready for the next grade. Some superintendents in successful parishes said the state tests are little more than a backup for their own, tougher promotion exams.

The standardized language and math tests were administered to 105,000 second and third graders last March. Scores were released last week.

Statewide, more than 93 percent of the second graders passed both of their tests, compared to 83 percent of the third graders. Performance varied widely across the state.

“High standards and hard work,” was how Union Parish Superintendent Chiles Carpenter summarized his parish’s No. 1 passing rate of more than 99 percent.

Parental support and involvement, concentration on the Three R’s and disdain for experimental teaching methods also were noted by school officials in the systems that performed best on the tests.

Teacher salaries, economic conditions and racial ratios did not appear to be major factors. Many of the top-ranking systems are in rural areas.

In north Louisiana parishes with high minority enrollment, a small tax base and pay scales lower than the state average.

Among the larger school systems, Caddo Parish, which has more than half black enrollment, had the lowest failure rate on the tests — less than 2 percent for second graders and 5 percent for third graders.

The East Baton Rouge Parish school system recorded a failure rate more than double that of Caddo, a school system of similar size.

“A few years ago we were near the bottom” in statewide assessment tests, Caddo Superintendent Walter Lee said.

The first step toward improvement, he said, was abandoning an experimental grading system.

“We were on a continuous progress, non-graded curriculum, which meant, in effect, no failures,” he said.

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“We were on a continuous progress, non-graded curriculum, which meant, in effect, no failures,” he said.

“IT permitted the student to move at his own pace. It was not enough challenge to the students. It permitted parents to believe their children were doing okay when they were not, and it removed the fear of failure.”

“You’ve got to have expectations to get results. You can’t get good results on the initiative of the individual alone . . . .”

He said the school system developed a clearly defined curriculum and let teachers know that they were supposed to follow it.

Caddo schools also started pre-kindergarten classes in economically deprived areas.

“By the time they spent two years in school before first grade, they’re not educationally deprived any more,” Lee said.

In West Baton Rouge Parish, only two of the 244 second graders — including special (See TESTS, Page 14-A)