La. has worst student dropout rate

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Louisiana has the worst student dropout rate in the country and ranks low in several other education rankings, according to a report to be released today.

Produced by the Washington, D.C.-based American Legislative Exchange Council, the "Report Card on American Education 1994" provides an analysis of how states stack up against one another in education.

Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Louisiana ranked last with a high school graduation rate of 56 percent, which equates to a No. 1 dropout rate of 44 percent during the 1993-94 school year.

The national graduation rate was 71 percent last school year.

The report also said Louisiana eighth-graders scored near the bottom in a national math achievement test, and Louisiana fourth-graders scored low in reading.

In a statistic related to educational achievement, the report said Louisiana ranked No. 1 in the percentage of school-age children living in poverty.

"Any time that we have something that makes Louisiana look like its educational system is not providing as good an education as possible for its youngsters, it disturbs me," state Education Superintendent Raymond Arveson said.

However, Arveson said he hasn't reviewed the report and cannot attest to its validity.

Polly Broussard, the head of the Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana, said the report confirms what her group already knows.

LOW GRADES FOR LA. EDUCATION

How Louisiana ranks among the 50 states plus the District of Columbia:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>La. Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school dropout rate</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School spending, per student</td>
<td>$4.402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students per teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th grade math scores</td>
<td>40th (of 42)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th grade reading scores</td>
<td>36th (of 42)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public school minority enrollment</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-aged children</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in poverty</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Nine states did not participate in the reading and math tests. Exact scores are not meaningful, so rankings only are reported.

SOURCE: American Legislative Exchange Council

Drop out

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"It's just not working," Broussard said of the Louisiana public school system. "It's just too big of a job for one system that's a monopoly."

That's why APEL is pushing legislation next year aimed at allowing "charter schools," Broussard said.

Under a charter-school plan, private groups could approach local school boards to get permission to open special schools for kids in need of help. The groups would be given public funds and could try innovative programs currently not used in public schools, Broussard said.

The study group came up with the graduation rate in each state by dividing the number of public school freshmen into the number of graduating seniors.

After Louisiana, Texas had the next-lowest graduation rate at 58 percent, followed by South Carolina at 61 percent and Florida and Mississippi both at 62 percent.

North Dakota had the highest graduation rate at 89 percent, followed by South Dakota and Wisconsin at 89 percent, and Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota, all at 86 percent.

The report also concluded that 32 percent of Louisiana children ages 5-17 live in poverty, the highest percentage in the country.

The District of Columbia and West Virginia were close behind Louisiana. Next was Mississippi at 31 percent.

Colorado and Alaska had the lowest percentage of poor 5- to 17-year-olds at 11 percent.

Louisiana fourth- and eighth-grade students ranked near the bottom on another education indicator.

Louisiana fourth-graders ranked No. 38 in reading and Louisiana eighth-grade students ranked No. 49 in mathematics when compared to 41 states and the District of Columbia on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1992.

Nine states weren't included in the reading-math study.

In other areas, the report ranks Louisiana:

- No. 21 in total public school spending during the 1993-94 school year at $3.5 billion. That includes state and local contributions.
- No. 87 in per-pupil public school spending at $4,402.
- No. 20 in public school enrollment with 799,917 students.
- No. 24 in the number of staff and classroom teachers employed by public school systems with 69,735 and No. 20 in the number of public school teachers with 45,600.
- No. 33 in pupil-to-teacher ratio at 18 students for every teacher.
- No. 7 in the percent of minority enrollment in public schools at 48 percent.