Students return to school

Classes overflow with record enrollment

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5/14/1994

More than 30,000 students are expected to pour into the already crowded Lafayette Parish schools this week as another school year begins with a record number of students.

Parish schools, which were built to accommodate 23,000 students, have been forced to accept well over that amount as the number of students enrolling increases at a rate of about 300 every year.

School officials are expecting 30,754 students this year. Last year the parish had 30,456 students.

Catholic schools in Lafayette also will begin classes this week with a record number of students.

Richard Meaux, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Lafayette, said Catholic schools in Lafayette will have more than 13,000 students in the system's 35 schools this year.

Meaux said the Catholic schools have definitely seen an increase in enrollment due to the overcrowding in public schools.

But Meaux said the Catholic schools are not required to make room for students. Once a school is full, no more students are accepted, he said.

"When we're full, we're full," Meaux said.

Meaux said most of the Catholic schools in Lafayette will have more students this year, and new classrooms will be added to two schools.

Lafayette Parish schools also will receive more classrooms this year.

Seven parish elementary schools and one parish middle school will receive permanent wings, giving the school district 141 new classrooms.

Construction is set to begin soon, and the wings should be completed in six to eight months.

In the meantime, Lafayette schools are using temporary buildings to ease overcrowding.

Lafayette Parish Superintendent of Schools Max Skidmore said this year's influx of new students has forced the parish to lease an additional temporary buildings.

The parish now uses 344 temporary buildings, and Skidmore said that is about 300 too many.

Skidmore said the temporary buildings are not an ideal school setting.

"Students and teachers are isolated from the rest of the school," he said. "They have to get out in the rain to do anything."

Board President Clarence Baldridge agreed that temporary buildings create new concerns for teachers.

"It increases discipline problems," Baldridge said.

It also limits students' access to campus facilities, such as the cafeteria and the library, he said.

As an example of the seriousness of the problem, Baldridge said it is possible in some parish schools for a student to progress from kindergarten through fifth grade without ever having a class in the permanent building of a school.

Although Baldridge said he would like to see the parish not have to use temporary buildings, he said this is probably not likely because the population continues to grow.

These are only temporary solutions to the parish's overcrowding problem, and Baldridge said a more permanent solution will come with the building of new schools, which should be under way in 1996.

The new schools will probably take two or three years to build.

The school board has about $30 million in bonds to fund construction of the new schools, but Skidmore said operating the facilities will take money that is not currently available.

The district has tried for many years to ease overcrowding by passing a half-cent sales tax increase earmarked for the construction of new schools.

This measure was soundly defeated in 1992, and public reaction to an alternative to building new schools by instituting year-
round schools, was not positive. A committee formed to look into overcrowding recommended that the parish again try to introduce the half-cent sales tax increase. Skidmore said this will certainly be an issue the school board will have to consider in the future.

Building the new schools will be one of the concerns of the new school board, which will be elected in October and will begin serving in January.

But the face of the school board already is certain to change with four incumbents deciding not to seek reelection.

Baldrige said this will be crucial to the board because past votes have been close, sometimes with Baldrige casting the deciding vote.

One issue that has come before this school board is a school away form school that will serve students who have been recommended for expulsion. Instead of being sent home, the children can attend class in an office-like setting.

Teachers have been selected for the special school, which will serve 50 to 75 students at both the middle school and high school levels.

Skidmore said the board will probably determine a location for the school, which will begin operating a few days after classes begin, at Wednesday’s school board meeting.