Work starts on school for agriculture

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Construction began Nov. 19 in Avoyelles Parish on a new campus for the Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences, which officials say is the state's only charter school with an agriculture-based curriculum.

The $5.4 million, four-building campus on 11.7 acres paid for with grants and state funds is being built for the Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences, which officials say is the state's only charter school with an agriculture-based curriculum.

The seed for LaSAS was planted after Bordelon and other officials toured a similar school in Chicago during a trip sponsored by Schools-to-Work, which has funded a lot of the research into LaSAS, Bordelon said. Like the Chicago school, other large cities have agriscience schools, Bordelon said. She said LaSAS is the only such school in the nation in a rural area.

Aside from its curriculum, LaSAS is unique in that it starts at the eighth grade, Bordelon said. She said officials noticed that the grades of students who do not do well in traditional schools begin a downward spiral in the middle school years. That typically precedes the decision to drop out.

Schools in the parish traditionally have had to compete against lucrative offshore jobs, which held more appeal to students meeting with failure in schools, Bordelon said. Bordelon said that, on average, 12 to 15 percent of Avoyelles Parish ninth-graders drop out. Over all, the average drop-out rate for ninth through 12th grades is about 6 percent, she said.

Superintendent Ronald Mayeux said the school's charter won the unanimous approval of the Avoyelles Parish School Board in 1999. The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved the school's charter the same year, Bordelon said. It is funded through the Minimum Foundation Program, the state's program for funding public schools.

The school's temporary quarters are in a former school in Marksville, Bordelon said. There are 120 eighth- and ninth-graders now enrolled in the school. Each of those grades has a waiting list, Bordelon said. Grades 10-12 will be added in the coming years, she said.

She said the school will be divided into three "academies"—agricultural science, with concentrations on animal and plant science and the environment; construction, with concentration on agriculture engineering and building construction; and food service, with concentration on nutrition, food service and restaurant management. Each academy's curriculum is designed to teach skills that meet work-force demands in the central Louisiana area, Bordelon said.

Crop land is a familiar sight to the students who will attend the school, Bordelon said, but most of them likely will not be from farming families.

The school's goal is not necessarily to cultivate a new generation of farmers, Bordelon said. An agriculture-based curriculum, however, can launch students on many different career paths, from marketing and business to food preparation and clothing production.

"All of those areas rely on agricultural production," Bordelon said.

Such a curriculum enables students to apply what they have learned while also preparing them for jobs and college.

"We teach all of the subjects all the other schools teach," she said.