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Iberia Parish Hunts, Traps "Skunk" *Graduation Rate Soars*

Since launching Louisiana's Promise in the fall of 2008, Education's Next Horizon regularly travels across the state to listen to school superintendents and identify ways to support their efforts. In a recent visit to the Iberia Parish School System, we discovered a proven model for success in tackling the dropout problem.

In 2008, Iberia Parish School Superintendent Dale Henderson returned from a statewide meeting of school superintendents determined to "Throw the Skunk" out of the building. The pesky varmint had put Iberia Parish second from the bottom in graduation rates among school districts across the state. Upon returning, Superintendent Henderson called Assistant Superintendent of Instruction Carey Laviolette to his office and put her in charge of getting rid of the skunk...and that she did!

The skunk was a 50.4% cohort graduation rate in a district of 1200 ninth graders. In two years, Iberia Parish School System increased the cohort graduation rate to 75.9%. What factors contributed to their success? "We started really paying attention to the problem," says Mr. Henderson. Determined to "throw the skunk" out the building, Iberia officials took three very important steps:

1. The district established a truancy court at three high schools. Each school is required to have a truancy plan.
2. They rallied community leaders around the issue. Nearly a dozen school and community leaders attended the Louisiana's Promise State Summit in October 2008 and the regional summit held several months later. In early 2009, the United Way of Iberia spearheaded community summit for Iberia Parish leaders and began to identify specific solutions to the dropout problem.
3. District leaders met with school principals and told them that the 50.4% rate was not acceptable and had to be improved. The skunk had to go!



Under the leadership of Assistant Superintendent Laviolette, the district developed an action plan to increase the high school graduation rate:

- They started looking more closely at data in the early warning system and noticed that many students who were dropping out had passed the high stakes tests. The district began requiring face-to-face meetings with students and parents before a child dropped out. Every school now has an early warning "watch list" of students who are at-risk of dropping out. School officials monitor grades, attendance, and disciplinary patterns.
- The district began providing support and intervention where needed. Programs such as Credit and Grade Recovery, Freshmen Academy, and Ninth Grade Initiative were implemented to help students make successful transitions from middle to high school.
- Administrators and teachers began to monitor "risk factors" of 6th grade students who were overage and had been retained once or twice. Using the TABE test, they measured student proficiency in math and reading to determine the level of remediation needed for transition to the 7th grade. Results now show that at least half these students have very strong potential to pass the 8th grade high stakes test.
- Iberia Parish now requires every school to prepare a School Improvement Plan and Graduation Rate Review that shows specific action steps to address the dropout problem. The plan has to document evidence of changes and progress made toward improving student achievement.

Iberia proved that the dropout problem can be solved by undertaking four basic steps: (1) gather data to understand and communicate the crisis to others, (2) engage the community, (3) develop and implement strategies and goals to attack the problem, and (4) develop strategies to sustain the effort. By focusing on "truancy" and "early detection" as foundation principles, they are now graduating three-fourths of all 9th graders and are well on their way to exceeding the 80% state goal.

For additional information about the Iberia Parish School System dropout prevention plan, contact Carey Laviolette at (337) 3674-7641 or by email at calaviolette@iberia.k12.la.us. To learn more about Louisiana's Promise, contact Frances Farlow of Education's Next Horizon at (225) 383-3844 or by email at ffarlow@lanxthorizon.org.



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