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# LISTENING SESSIONS

*with Louisiana School Leaders  
and Educators*



FRAMING THE DEBATE FOR SYSTEMWIDE REFORM

*January 2009*



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*Early Childhood Education*

*Low Student Achievement*

*Universal Pre-K*

*Leadership Perception*

*Accountability*

*Credit Recovery*

*Teacher Recruitment*

**“WE BELIEVE THAT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT  
SUPERINTENDENTS  
ARE CARETAKERS**

*Funding*

*Career and Technical Education*

*Low Attendance*

*Work Conditions*

**OF THE  
TRANSFORMATION**

*Teacher Qualifications*

**PROCESS.”**

*Career Awareness*

*High School Redesign* — *Education's Next Horizon*

*Community Support*

*Teacher Certification*

*High Dropout Rate*

*District Governance*

*Low Attendance*

*Options Program*



# LISTENING SESSIONS

*with Louisiana School Leaders and Educators*

**FRAMING THE DEBATE FOR SYSTEMWIDE REFORM**

## INTRODUCTION

Education's Next Horizon is a statewide non-profit organization with a complete focus on Louisiana PreK-12 education. Our mission is to frame the debate for education reform and to connect Louisiana's leadership—education, government, business and community—as a force supporting meaningful school improvement. We believe that the key to school improvement is the work done in each school and each school district. Our approach is to help “transform policies into results” by building bridges and networks with policy makers, community leaders and education supporters across the state. We do this by listening, learning and sharing knowledge and ideas that will promote and support education improvement.

In January 2008, within two months of its startup, Education's Next Horizon launched two initiatives to understand what will be required to improve public education.

### *Stakeholder Council Workgroups*

The organization's Stakeholder Council, made up of education, government, and business leaders across the state, launched two (2) study groups to build consensus around policies and strategies to address critical education issues. The “Bridging the Skills Gap” workgroup was formed to focus on strategies that better connect students to careers and post secondary education. The “Early Childhood Education” workgroup was formed to focus on the development of high-quality, outcome-oriented early childhood learning opportunities. It was decided that a third study area, “Preparing Students to Graduate,” will be addressed by regional dropout prevention planning initiatives in 2009.

### *Listening Sessions with District Superintendents*

The second initiative the organization launched was a listening tour with district superintendents across the state. This report documents the feedback and findings of those conversations.

We believe that school district superintendents are caretakers of the transformation process. They are responsible for leading change at the local level. We thought it necessary and important to hear their concerns, ideas and suggestions in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities for education improvement at the school and district levels. From January to September 2008, we traveled across the state and met with superintendents of the following eight (8) regional superintendent associations representing the parishes noted:

#### **Region I:**

Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles

#### **Region II:**

East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Washington, West Baton Rouge, West Feliciana, City of Baker, City of Bogalusa, Zachary Community, Central Community

**Region III:**

Ascension, Assumption, Lafourche, St. James, St. John, St. Mary, Terrebonne

**Region IV:**

Acadia, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, Vermilion

**Region V:**

Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis

**Region VI:**

Avoyelles, Grant, LaSalle, Natchitoches, Rapides, Sabine, Vernon

**Region VII:**

Bienville, Bossier, Caddo, Claiborne, DeSoto, Red River, Webster

**Region VIII:**

Caldwell, Catahoula, Concordia, East Carroll, Franklin, Jackson, Lincoln, Madison, Morehouse, Ouachita, Richland, Tensas, Union, West Carroll, City of Monroe

In the case of Regions III, VII and VIII, we also met with school principals and early childhood education coordinators.

Each listening session lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Conversations were facilitated by the CEO of Education's Next Horizon. Members of the Board of Directors also attended. The sessions were attended by most superintendents of each region.

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In most cases, the meetings were held at the Regional Educational Service Centers of the State Department of Education. Several meetings were held on university campuses. We are grateful to the superintendents' administrative staff and Regional Education Service Center directors for helping schedule and coordinate sessions.

The report is presented in three parts. **Part One** is a **compilation of conversations with superintendents by region**. **Part Two** is a **summary of comments made by principals and early childhood education coordinators**. **Part Three** is an **analysis of common issues, concerns and ideas shared by all regions**.

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## PART ONE: DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS



### REGION I SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA

Superintendents of Region I offered the following ideas for school improvement:

■ **Low Attendance / High Dropout Rate.**

According to Region I superintendents, middle and high school students don't see high school as a means to career attainment and advancement. Schools have to figure out ways to change student perceptions of school and to better motivate students to keep them in school. Schools need to provide more options such as career and technical education and dual enrollment. In cases where dual enrollment is available, access is limited by the requirement that students score a minimum of 12 on "The Plan" Pre-ACT test. Funding is needed to expand dual enrollment offerings to students who do not achieve the minimum score.

Transportation is a related issue. In many areas, students can't get to the technical college where dual enrollment courses are offered. Teachers at the LTCs should go to the high school campus to teach courses.

■ **Teacher Recruitment.** This region is still experiencing the effects of Hurricane Katrina on teacher capacity. Teach for America has provided a number of teachers, but they are only available on two-year contracts. More teachers are needed to implement the additional rigor requirements in math and science. It was suggested that Louisiana initiate a comprehensive, statewide teacher recruitment program to attract more secondary education teachers. The state needs to "market the teaching profession" as a viable career option. Teachers also need short on-line courses to be better trained in curriculum content.

■ **Accountability.** Superintendents noted that the state's accountability model is "counter-intuitive" to how students learn and progress. The state should explore the practicality and feasibility of a "value-added" accountability model in which a student's individual learning abilities are identified, and growth is measured on an "individual" basis.

### REGION II

Superintendents of Region II commented as follows:

■ **Standards and Accountability.**

Superintendents voiced concern that the state's accountability system has caused "unintended consequences." The system is punitive and focuses more on negative aspects of performance rather than on student gains and improvements. As one superintendent noted, "the system is designed to catch someone doing something wrong, not to catch someone doing something right."

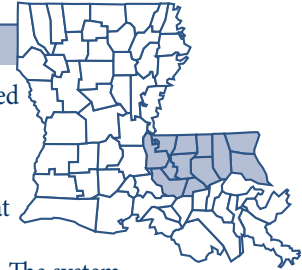
It was stated that the public does not fully understand the accountability system, particularly the "labeling" aspects. The public does not understand the distinction between 50% and the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. In addition, the public equates the five-star system to traditional grading on a scale of A to F. As an example, one school district reported that 24% of its students scored Advanced in math. If students score at Basic, the perception is that they are average even though they perform well above average on national tests such as ACT and SAT. It was also noted that the accountability "cut scores" are too high. They don't allow teachers and schools to celebrate success and individual growth.

Low attendance is a major factor in test results. While attendance is essentially a family and student choice, pressure is placed on schools to get students to attend classes to take tests. Schools are also penalized for students dropping out due to families moving.

Region II superintendents noted that some members of the state's Accountability Commission think that superintendents want to "water down" the system and see them as adversaries.

In terms of recommended changes to the accountability system, Region II superintendents suggested a range of options:

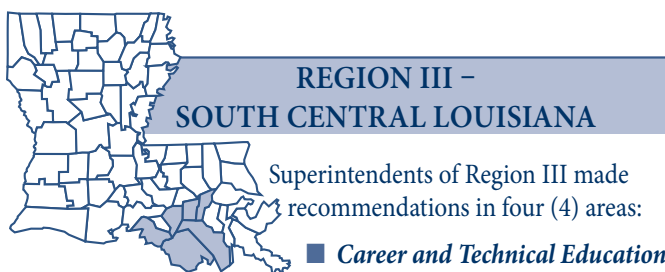
- Make tests shorter and with shorter passages that elementary students understand.
- Make tests look more like other state assessments.
- Make LEAP tests more consistent from year to year.



- Look at how well students grow from year to year, not just in any one year.
- Look at longitudinal studies as an alternative to test results.
- Determine what is “adequate accountability” for special education students.

■ **High School Redesign.** Superintendents made comments about the state’s High School Redesign initiative. Some stated that those initiatives emphasize rigor but don’t place enough emphasis on relevance and relationships. It was also noted that the current Academic Endorsement places too much focus on college preparatory options, but college degrees are not requisites to success. Schools should also teach the kinds of skills and attributes that businesses need, such as work ethic, problem-solving, creative thinking, and collaborative learning.

■ **Public and State Leadership Perception of Public vs. Private Schools.** Superintendents of Region II voiced a number of concerns about the public’s perception of public education as well as the perception of state leaders such as the governor and legislature. Superintendents feel that in Louisiana private schools are perceived as being better than public schools. Superintendents expressed concern that some public officials share that perception. As one superintendent stated, “the public school system has become the school system for the poor.” Public schools are regarded as the repository of everyone’s ills. Other concerns noted were that private schools have selective admission and generally don’t take special education students, but public schools have no choice. Some suggested that public schools need greater advocacy support on top education issues facing the state legislature.

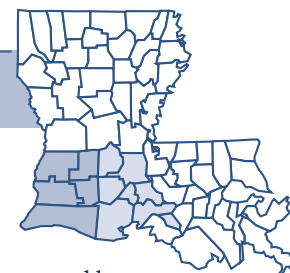


■ **Career Awareness.** Superintendents noted a need for greater career awareness among students, parents, and teachers. School board members and state legislators also need to be better informed about the value of CTE. Superintendents indicated that counselors alone cannot provide career education. They suggested a more regional community-based approach such as the campaign being launched in their region. This involves a consortium of area parishes and economic development organizations.

■ **District Governance.** Region III superintendents also stressed a need for statewide reform of school boards. Options that should be considered include at-large school districts and elimination of school board salaries.

■ **Early Childhood Education.** The superintendents strongly support early childhood education. They suggested that funding for universal Pre-K be made a part of the MFP and that the state help to provide adequate facilities.

**REGION IV AND REGION V  
SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA**



- **Career and Technical Education.** Superintendents noted that High School Redesign is too focused on rigor and not enough on relevance. A number of related concerns were noted:
  - Focus on CTE should begin in middle school.
  - Options program is not working effectively.
  - Many children have no idea what career options are available.
  - It is important to educate parents about CTE options.
  - Consider allowing electives in 9<sup>th</sup> grade as an alternative to Algebra I.
  - Best way to deal with overage students is to change their environment and give them better options.
  - Dual enrollment in a skills certification program is the key.



### REGION VI CENTRAL LOUISIANA

Superintendents of Central Louisiana made suggestions and recommendations in three (3) areas:

- **High School Redesign.** Superintendents indicated a need for more financial and staff support in the implementation of High School Redesign requirements. They expressed concern about the motives and make-up of the HSR Commission and generally felt that the new requirements lacked sufficient local input. Other related concerns:
  - There is a need to better prepare children to think.
  - Curriculum prepares students for jobs that don't exist.
  - More guidance is needed for credit recovery, i.e. test standardization and guidelines for granting credit.
  - Teachers feel frustrated.
  - Not enough teachers are available to teach the new rigor requirements.
  - More should be invested (tuition and training) in alternative certification.
- **Career and Technical Education.** Superintendents commented on Career and Technical Education offerings:
  - Students should be taught skills that prepare them for high paying jobs, not just jobs that businesses need.
  - Industrial Arts should be taught in high school.
  - Technical colleges (dual enrollment) should be teaching high school students how to think.

- Need more focus on competency-based curriculum.
- Students need more guidance about career options.
- State Career Options Law is not working effectively.
- Need more articulation between technical colleges and high schools.

- **Accountability.** Superintendents voiced concern that accountability is too focused on rigor. As one superintendent noted, “teachers have to teach the test.”

### REGION VII – NORTHWEST LOUISIANA

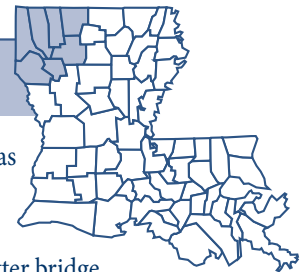
Region VII Superintendents offered ideas and suggestions in five (5) areas:

- **High School Redesign.** Superintendents noted a need to better bridge the gap between middle school and high school. Teaching needs to be more project-based and computer-based. Redesign should start at Pre-K, not 9<sup>th</sup> grade. More funding is needed for Career and Technical Education, particularly courses in construction trades. School districts need to have more course options that fit their individual needs.

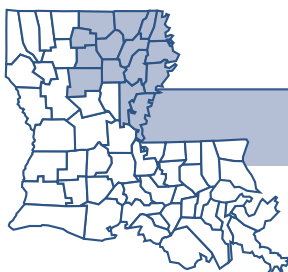
Superintendent also stressed that a key variable of student and school success is parental support and student respect for education. More should be done to address that issue. There is too much of a mind-set that the problem with education is with educators and school boards.

Region VII superintendents stated that student retention policies do not work. Other alternatives should be explored such as finding ways to make curriculum more relevant to students.

- **Universal Pre-K.** Superintendents advocated making universal Pre-K a regular component of the MFP and not making it mandatory. Districts should be given the option. They also expressed the need for more early childhood education teachers. State funding for Pre-K applies only to additional students. School systems that have used Title I, 8(g), and Tobacco Tax funds for Pre-K are not allowed to supplant old funding with new funding. Superintendents recommend that this restriction be removed.



- **Accountability.** Superintendents aired a number of concerns regarding the state’s accountability system:
  - Lack of correlation and inconsistent results between the IOWA test and the iLeap.
  - Need more valid measures of student progress.
  - No correlation between accountability results and grade-level expectations.
  - California Achievement Tests provided more “prescriptive” data and specific data on student deficiencies.
  - NCLB is doubling the dropout rate.
  - LEAP scores of special education students count toward the total school score; Special Education scores should be counted separately.
  - Special Education students are not taught the consequences of behavior. Federal and state laws that restrict disciplining special education students often conflict.
  - The accountability system should consider individual student growth factors.
  
- **State Takeover of Failing Schools.** Region VII superintendents questioned how the state will deal with school takeovers. They questioned why so many restrictions are placed on school systems that aren’t imposed on charter schools. They also expressed concern about the enrollment flexibility of charter schools.
  
- **General Governance.** Superintendents felt that at least one of the new appointments to BESE should be from northwest Louisiana. They feel that the legislature often passes laws without realizing the impact on local districts and schools.



**REGION VIII –  
NORTHEAST LOUISIANA**

Superintendents of Region VIII commented on several topics:

- **Accountability and Public Perception of Public Schools.** Superintendents noted that children learn at varying paces. Districts are being penalized for keeping overage students in school. Outcomes are skewed because charter schools “cream the top” and do not accept at-risk students. Superintendents also noted that accountability and embracing the charter school concept causes public relations problems for

district schools. More should be said about the good that district schools do. A public relations program is needed to promote public education from a positive perspective.

Subgroup measurement also causes concern.

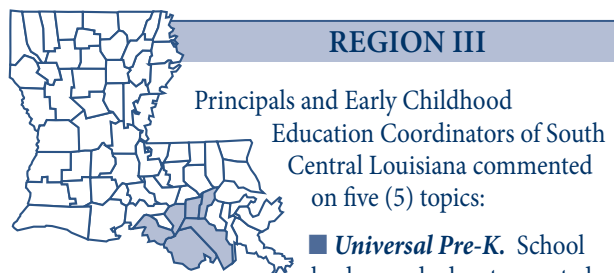
- **Parental Involvement.** Superintendents feel that community partnership and parental involvement is key. They suggested that the State Department of Education should speak more on this and should require parental involvement as is done in charter schools.
  
- **Placement of Overage Students.** Superintendents also feel that keeping overage middle school students on junior high school campuses effects classroom discipline as well as creates a perception problem for the students. Superintendents should have more input in these decisions.
  
- **High School Redesign.** Much of this region is rural and poor. Superintendents noted that many if not most students of rural communities will not attend college. Funding is needed for Career and Technical Education courses and for instructional capacity (teachers, facilities and equipment) in these communities. Superintendents in this region feel that they have little voice in the decision making process of state policymakers.
  
- **Funding.** Superintendents expressed funding needs in several areas.
  - Rural school districts are particularly challenged in recruiting qualified teachers; state funding is needed for more teachers to meet the new rigor requirements.
  - Location also poses a problem in terms of teachers reaching students to teach certain types of vocational courses.
  - Funding is needed for an extended school year and for year round school.
  - More state funding is needed for dual enrollment, particularly the financing of tuition and books.
  - More state funding is needed for counselors in elementary and middle schools; counselors are needed who understand the unique problems of today’s at-risk children.
  - More collaboration is needed between Pre-K and Head Start programs to ensure adequate teaching capacity and transportation.

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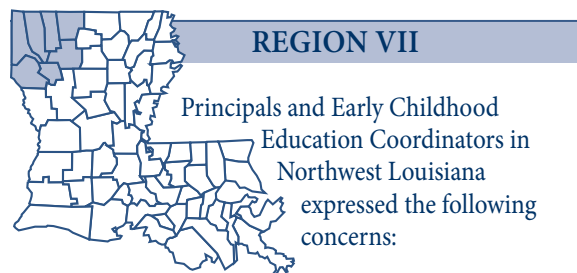
## PART TWO

### PRINCIPALS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION COORDINATORS



Principals and Early Childhood Education Coordinators of South Central Louisiana commented on five (5) topics:

- **Universal Pre-K.** School leaders and educators noted that the inclusion of 3-year-olds will pose capacity problems for districts that can't afford additional buildings and teachers. In addition, certain requirements of ECERS (state rating system for Pre-K providers) result in higher costs for buildings and maintenance.
- **Options Program.** There was general consensus among those present that the Options Program is not working well for overage students. They indicated that teachers do not want to teach Options students. It was suggested that the state explore the concept of regional alternative (boarding) schools for overage students.
- **Credit Recovery.** Leaders and educators expressed concern that school districts are expected to develop their own test instruments for credit recovery. The state is not providing standard software and is very slow in approving tests developed by the districts. School leaders questioned why the state cannot allow districts to use tests that have already been approved for specific subjects.
- **Teacher Certification.** To help address the teacher shortage issue, the state should be more flexible and approve teacher certifications in "broader" categories that don't restrict teachers to a limited number of teaching options.
- **High School Redesign.** School leaders stated that business and industry needs to better educate students and parents about career options. Industry can also help by supplementing salaries of workers who teach CTE courses.



Principals and Early Childhood Education Coordinators in Northwest Louisiana expressed the following concerns:

- **High School Redesign.** School leaders and educators of this region feel that more rigorous curriculum does not reduce dropouts; students need curriculum that interests them. There is too much interest on college-prep and not enough emphasis on vocational education.

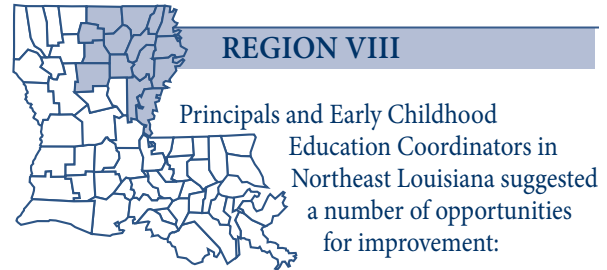
Leaders also feel that the "opt out" provision is not giving students a real alternative. A vast number of students are not being prepared. In addition, the Reading First program is not transitioning elementary and middle school students. Students need more literacy support in middle and high school.

School leaders in this region noted that teachers need to be "retooled" and given more professional development training to better understand what industry needs.

- **Options Program.** It was noted that 45% of Options 3 students are in special education and difficult to track. Of 10,000 Option 3 students, only several hundred end up with a GED. The Options Program doesn't reach students who need technical skills. Where feasible and practical, some Options Programs should be concentrated geographically.

School leaders and educators suggested that the LA Virtual School program can be used to better train low achievers. They also suggested that something needs to be done to address the negative stigma associated with the Options Program. It was suggested that all options should be "pathways to excellence."

- **Accountability.** School leaders noted that low performance scores impact teacher recruitment efforts. They also felt that SPS scores should be interpreted on the basis of demographics. This can be particularly critical for rural parishes that don't have a strong industrial base and where "99% of the teachers are local." It was suggested that accountability scores be handicapped or adjusted for the number of students on free or reduced lunch. School leaders noted other related concerns:
  - Need to find a way to allow students to get high school credit while studying for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade LEAP test.
  - We are so busy testing how smart our children are that we don't test where our children are smart. We must concentrate on natural interests.
  - We need to focus more on qualitative measures.
  - Every child has a path to excellence, but the path has its own definition.
  - There are too many mixed messages. Eight graders are evaluated in language arts and math but later need science and social studies. Some students with higher composite scores are retained because they have lower language arts and math scores and higher science and social studies.
- **Early Childhood Education.** Principals and educators feel that early childhood education should be a part of the MFP; it should be universal but not mandatory.
- **Other General Concerns Noted:**
  - Bulletin 741, [Louisiana Handbook for School Administrators](#), is too restrictive; a task force is needed to study possible waivers.
  - Parents need to be better educated about the value of vocational education.
  - State education leadership embraces charter schools too quickly even though charter schools have selective enrollment.



- **Low Student Achievement.** School leaders and educators noted a significant gap between expected and realistic achievement. Many 9<sup>th</sup> graders are reading at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. It was stated as many as 95% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders do not enter high school ready and willing to learn. Many students start to drop off at 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The better teachers are put on high-stakes testing grades level. We need to focus just as much on the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grades as we do the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

Leaders feel that a lot of the low achievement problem is attitudinal. Students have no confidence and place little or no value on education. They don't understand why they need to learn. They are not motivated to learn, which leads to lack of self-confidence. We have to find ways to determine the strengths and aptitudes of low achieving students.

School leaders and educators in this region also feel that more reading remediation is needed at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. More effective alternative education is also needed.

It was noted that students are not retaining what they learn. Some students just don't test well and can't pass the GEE. It was suggested that we need more collaboration between pre-school and high school to better connect relevancy to learning. In addition, there should be a greater focus on middle-junior high school support systems.

We need to find ways to "celebrate children."

- **Teacher Qualifications and Work Conditions.** A number of comments were made about teacher capacity and work conditions:
  - Many teachers are not information technology literate and lack enough knowledge of information technology to use in the classroom.
  - Teachers need to have time for training. Teachers need embedded professional development; teachers want to hear from their peers.

- Truancy boards are needed to contact parents when students are not in school.
  - There is a critical need for more counselors at all levels.
  - There is no time to have a true IEP conference for special education students.
  - Classroom teachers are inundated with policies that are often inconsistent.
  - Teachers feel that their word means nothing. Teacher morale is at an all-time low.
- **Early Childhood Education.** Leaders and educators noted that special needs children are served by Head Start in some areas. But in other areas, there is no coordination between Head Start and Pre-K. There is also a shortage of certified teachers in Head Start.
- **Community Support.** Leaders stated a need to connect schools to the whole community, but public perceptions and community relations often depend on school board actions.

***“District and school leaders expressed a need for more voice and input in state mandated policies that affect them and for more support in policy implementation.”***

— *Education’s Next Horizon*

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## *PART THREE:* COMMON ISSUES AND CONCERNS

### *GENERAL OBSERVATIONS*

The tone and tenor of the conversations with district superintendents, principals, and early childhood education coordinators was extremely positive. We found them eager to speak openly and candidly. In fact, they expressed appreciation for our taking time to listen and document their concerns and ideas for education improvement. We found them to be very concerned about the well-being of students and teachers.

Even though several common themes and issues emerged, it was plainly evident that geography and region pose unique challenges, particularly for the more rural parishes of north Louisiana and the Katrina impacted southeast.

District and school leaders expressed a need for more voice and input in state mandated policies that affect them and for more support in policy implementation.

They are very concerned about general public and state leadership perceptions of public school performance and the impact of negative perceptions on their capacity and ability to lead and educate.

Redesign initiatives. They believe that students need to be better prepared for the more rigorous demands of high school math and language arts. Students and parents need more options and career guidance. Superintendents in every region indicated a need for more career and technical education course options and teaching capacity to make curriculum relevant and interesting for academically challenged at-risk students.

### ■ *Accountability*

- Participants in all regions voiced concerns about unintended consequences of the state's accountability system, particularly the negative public perceptions caused by low performance scores.
- Leaders feel that they are being held accountable for factors beyond their control and that reported outcomes do not take into account individual student and subgroup abilities, growth factors and demographic factors.
- Leaders feel a double standard in measurement because of the inclusion of special education test scores and the perceived selective enrollment procedures of charter schools and private schools against which they are measured.
- Leaders and educators feel that the accountability system places too much emphasis on negative results and does not capture enough positive, progressive outcomes of the learning process. They want tests to be more consistent, valid and reliable indicators of student progress.

### ■ *Universal Pre-K*

District leaders, school leaders and educators urge more state funding for early childhood education. They urge that funding be made a part of the MFP, but that districts be given greater flexibility in local funding allocations. They also urge more coordination between Pre-K and Head Start in order to meet the special needs of at-risk children.

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### TOP CONCERNS

#### ■ *High School Redesign*

This issue encompasses several "sub-issues":

- Low-performing Students
- Dropout Rates
- Options Program
- Career and Technical Education
- Teacher Capacity and Qualifications
- Literacy

The general consensus among session participants was that the new rigor requirements of High School Redesign do not address the most critical problem districts face in the context of the demographic factors that impact their ability to educate. District leaders and classroom teachers need more support and financial resources to implement High School



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412 N. Fourth Street, Suite 240  
Baton Rouge, LA 70802  
225-383-3844

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