

**DISTRICT VISION:** To develop a productive school culture that increases student achievement, develops teacher effectiveness and builds public confidence.



# EQUITABLE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL

*By:*

*Kelli Joseph, Ed.D. and Clif St. Germain, Ph.D.*

## **ABSTRACT:**

In recent years substantive changes to the metrics of the School Performance Score within Louisiana's Accountability System have systematically undervalued the commendable over-all progress of students in small, rural, mostly minority school districts. These metrics have also created insurmountable disincentives for teachers in these districts who teach many of the neediest students. This white paper explains the impact of these changes upon St. Helena Parish School District and is written for anyone who is interested in improving public education in Louisiana. It is not intended for publication, but rather is offered here as a context for discussions about making the Louisiana Accountability System fair and equitable. References have not been inserted in the text to aid ease of reading.

## Introduction

The practice of using one standardized assessment result for students scoring “basic or above” as the primary indicator of progress within the Louisiana Accountability System unfairly disadvantages school districts with comparatively large numbers of students in lower achievement categories. To further compound the problem, the most recent changes in the “school performance” metric resulted in a strong disincentive for administrators and teachers in poor, rural, small, minority school districts because students in lower performance categories must make insurmountable gains to advance the district’s or school’s performance. When compared to more affluent systems, these districts work with limited financial resources, and must begin each year with disproportionately negative levels of summer learning loss. They must also overcome the challenge of appearing to be less effective on School Performance calculations within Louisiana’s Accountability System because that System ignores recent research on the academic challenges faced by schools that educate poor, minority students.

A variety of factors negatively affect educational outcomes of students in rural areas— e.g., poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage, small student populations, limited community resources, difficulty recruiting and retaining good teachers and systemic factors such as geographic isolation and the imposition of an urban model of schooling in rural schools.

A recent study by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education found that rural schools in all states have less financial and community resources than their wealthier urban neighbors. Not only are these districts subject to challenges related to statistical errors of measurement related to small sample size, but the accountability tests in use are narrow measures of what students know and can do and do not necessarily evaluate students’

communication skills, depth of knowledge and understanding, and/or critical thinking and performance abilities.

While Common Core State Standards (CCSS) equalize the information taught from state to state and school to school, the student and teacher achievement gap in Louisiana has further widened because the implementation of CCSS was changed from a yearly progression to full-fledged implementation. And currently, these standards are being re-evaluated along with the accompanying PARCC assessments designed to test student mastery of the standards.

Therefore, we assert the following:

The existing Louisiana school performance system as presently computed remains irrelevant to small, rural, minority school districts due to (1) a limited capacity to identify schools making progress across all achievement categories, (2) failure to create an equitable comparison between large, affluent school districts and small, rural, minority schools and, most importantly (3) the inability to identify and reward outlier schools and to acknowledge commendable programs and progress despite large numbers of low performing and special needs students.

### **Effects of Small Sample Size**

In small, rural schools, a small sample size can provide misleading results for many reasons. Analysts must average test scores over large numbers of students to get reasonably stable estimates of average learning. As statistical models clearly affirm, the larger the number of students in a tested group, the smaller will be the average error because positive errors will tend to cancel out negative errors. When there are small numbers of test-takers the average score can be skewed considerably. Assigning percentages creates a further disadvantage. Table 1 compares

the actual percentage “worth” of each 4<sup>th</sup> grade initial test taker according to the number of students who were tested in 2012.

**Table 1: 2012 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Initial Test Takers: Numbers and Percents**

Parish	Total Number of Test Takers	Percent Passing Rate of Test Takers	Actual Number of Test Takers who Passed	Percentage Worth per Test Taker
<i>LOUISIANA</i>	<i>50,902</i>	<i>81%</i>	<i>41,207</i>	<i>.002%</i>
Jefferson Parish	3,361	81%	2,717	.03%
Grant Parish	243	81%	198	.4%
<b>St. Helena Parish</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1.12%</b>

Carl Perkins requirements provide another example of inequitable treatment for smaller school districts. These funds, used to support Career and Technical Education programs for high school students, require districts to set local performance targets at or above the state baseline. When a district does not meet the state baseline for three consecutive years, a Performance Improvement Plan is required. There are eight performance areas in the Improvement Plan, including: Academic Attainment Reading/Language Arts (1S1), Academic Attainment Mathematics (1S2), Technical Skill Attainment (2S1), Secondary School Completion (3S1), Student Graduation Rate (4S1), Secondary Placement (5S1), Participation Nontraditional (6S1), and Completion Nontraditional (6S2). Based on data collected for 2013-2016, St. Helena College and Career Academy did not meet the state baseline for Nontraditional Completion. In order to meet the state baseline, two out of every ten students would have to be in a nontraditional program.

It has been extremely difficult to improve participation in nontraditional fields, e.g., a female student in welding classes or a male student in nursing classes due to the small class size. Outside of forcing students to enroll in courses where there is no true desire, we have no control over the participation rate for nontraditional programs. Furthermore, the lack of funding

prevents poor school districts from providing a robust dual enrollment program for students to meet Jumpstart pathways requirements.

Small school districts must also meet the same requirements to serve students with disabilities as larger more affluent districts. Due to the small, near-homogeneous population in St. Helena and other rural districts, data do not fully reflect progress related to students with disabilities in graduation, dropout rates, and discipline rates by ethnicity. In St. Helena, very few students can have a disproportionately negative impact on percentages of students who drop out and graduate.

Using a percentage as an indicator of district progress obfuscates true progress because of the small number of students in the sample size. For example, in St. Helena, a dropout rate of 40% is reached if only 4 out of 10 students with disabilities in the eligible group drop out. In a larger district, 40 out of 100 students may drop out before the district reaches the 40% drop out rate.

Similarly, the small number of students in this rural district poses a challenge with respect to demonstrating progress in graduation of students with disabilities. In St. Helena, the district would fail to meet the state target of 40% if only three students with disabilities graduate out of a cohort of 10 students. Whereas, 60 students may enter the community without diplomas if 40 of the 100 eligible students graduate in larger school districts. Yet, the larger district would meet the state target.

In the most obvious example of the challenges presented to small rural homogeneous districts, St. Helena, with a disproportionate population of 91% African American and 7.7%

Caucasian and 1.3% Hispanic, is cited regularly for disproportionate discipline reporting of African American students with disabilities.

### **Demographics Correlate to Student Achievement**

Research over the last decade confirms that student scores on standardized accountability tests are strongly influenced by a variety of out-of-school demographic factors. These factors such as (1) the percentage of students who are poor, (2) the percentage of students who are minority, and (3) the residential mobility of students' families, are beyond individual school control yet they account for up to 80% of the variance in school-level outcomes. Nationally, schools placed on "Academic Watch" for unsatisfactory performance are, on average, 95.1 % poor and 90% minority.

The use of spring-to-spring high stakes standardized tests as a primary indicator of school performance fails to acknowledge these tests are disproportionately influenced by out-of-school socioeconomic characteristics. Not only are small, rural, minority schools sanctioned more on their levels of poverty and racial characteristics, but contextual factors within these schools known to indicate commendable progress and best educational practice are virtually ignored.

For example, St. Helena Schools have been rated poorly by school performance calculations, yet despite these ratings earned the coveted distinction of District Accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). This rigorous external review of best practices in teaching and effective schooling is a more reliable and equitable assessment of school progress and performance, especially for small, rural, minority school districts.

## Equity in Testing

“The major limitation of using aggregate, one-time snapshot comparisons to evaluate “school effectiveness” is the unjustified assumption that students who begin at different achievement levels should be expected to gain at the same rate, and that all gains are due solely to the individual teacher (or school) to which student scores are attached. Moreover, these academic comparisons do not adequately control for students’ socioeconomic advantages or disadvantages that may affect not only their initial levels but their future learning rates. Thus, schools working in affluent suburban districts typically fare better than poor, rural school districts because the achievement scores of their students are interpreted directly as a measure of their effectiveness. Conversely, in poor rural schools that serve a disproportionate number of students’ with significant learning challenges, lower performance scores are interpreted as if factors other than the scores on end of year standardized test are irrelevant.”

Shavelson, Richard J. Linn Robert L., Eva L., Helen F., Darling-Hammond, Linda Shepard, Barton, Paul E., Haertel, Edward, Ravitch, Diane and Rothstein, Richard. 2010. Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers, Economic Policy Institute.

According to Shavelson et. al, many policy makers argue that it is easier for students at the bottom of the achievement distribution to make gains because they have more of a gap to overcome. However, this argument is not confirmed by research. Indeed, as educators we assert that higher performing students generally find it easier to master content because they have accumulated prior knowledge and skills. Their previous learning success supports greater levels of independent learning, and they, on average, fare better academically regardless of teacher effectiveness.

## Value Added Methodology

Although value-added approaches are improvements over *status* test-score comparisons, the claim that VAM (value added methodology) tests can “level the playing field” and provide reliable, valid, and fair comparisons is overstated. Even when student demographic characteristics are considered, the value-added measures are too unstable-- (i.e., vary widely) across time, across the classes that teachers teach, and across tests that are used to evaluate instruction-- to be used as a primary determinant of school and teacher effectiveness. This

finding suggests that VAM cannot control completely for differences in students' characteristics or starting points.

Even when value-added methods (VAM) are used to adjust statistically for student demographic factors and school differences, many small, rural school districts receive lower "performance" scores because their student distributions include disproportionate numbers of special education students whose learning progress is not fully accounted for in the current school performance score metrics. Furthermore, value added statistical models presently in use cannot fully adjust for the fact that some schools will have a disproportionate number of students who may be exceptionally difficult to teach. These are students who have a previous history of poor attendance, who are homeless, who have severe problems at home, and who enter or leave the school during the year. For many of these students traditional standardized tests are frequently not valid (e.g., those who have special education needs or who are English language learners).

### **Summer Learning Loss**

Summer learning loss is yet another demographic not accounted for in the present school performance score metric. Research confirms that rates of summer learning loss are substantially different between students in low income communities and students in middle income communities. A research summary on this topic by Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, illustrates that while students generally lose on average about one month in reading achievement over the summer, lower-income students lose significantly more. However, middle and high-income students, because of the availability of summer learning opportunities, may actually gain in reading proficiency over the summer.

Additional studies of summer learning loss also affirm that summer learning differences over the years of elementary school accounted for two-thirds of the difference between the ninth grade test scores of high and low socioeconomic status students. This means that teachers who teach a greater share of lower-income students are cumulatively disadvantaged by summer learning loss because estimates of their effectiveness are calculated in terms of gains in their students' test scores from the previous years.

Furthermore, numerous comparisons of rural and urban schools reveal that rural schools typically have fewer out-of-school supports for learning and, therefore, their students have been found to experience significant summer learning loss (between the time they leave school in June and the time they return in the fall). These summer losses made substantial impacts on small rural districts. Researchers have found that three-fourths of schools identified in the bottom 20% of all schools based on the scores of students during the school year, would not be so identified if differences in learning outside of school were taken into account.

“Since it is low SES youth specifically whose out-of-school learning lags behind, this summer shortfall relative to better-off children contributes to the perpetuation of family advantage and disadvantage across generations.”

-Alexander, Olson, Entwisle, 2007

Suffice it to say that teachers who teach large numbers of low-income students are noticeably disadvantaged in spring-to-spring test gain analyses because their students start the fall further behind than more affluent students who do not experience high levels of summer learning loss.

## St. Helena Parish Demographics

Based on the 2010 census, St. Helena Parish is a rural, predominantly black (53%), low socio-economic community in which 27.4% of its citizens live below the poverty line which is 9.3% above the state average. The rate of those 25 and older with a high school diploma has risen from 75.9% to 80.6%. While this is an improvement, only 10.3% of the same age group earned a Bachelor's degree, or higher certification; well below the 21.8% state average. In recent years, there has been no substantial growth in the level of employment, business growth, or positive change in family structure.

Educationally, the parish has consistently ranked at the bottom in the Louisiana Accountability System. This low performance ranking ultimately resulted in the take-over of its only middle school by the Recovery School District (RSD) in 2010. The remaining elementary and high schools operated under a Memorandum of Understanding with the RSD that placed various restrictions on the school, including the inability to reconfigure grades.

Due to the rural nature of the parish, teacher recruitment and retention is clearly a major challenge. The closest university is over 30 miles away with many of those students already commuting from other areas. A recent survey of current St. Helena Parish School District employees found that roughly 70% of employees commute 30 minutes or more one way. In addition, the low tax base in St. Helena limits the district's ability to offer competitive teacher salaries when compared with neighboring districts, leading to higher rates of teacher attrition. The district has put measures in place to address these issues, including a tax millage to increase employee salary. However, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers remains a challenge every school year.

**District Performance Scores and Grading Scale**

Table 2 below lists the performance of the school district from 2011 to 2015. St. Helena Parish School District improved 13.8 points in 2012 from a 58 to a 71.8. In 2013, district scores reflected the changes made to the state’s grading scale thereby decreasing the score to a 45.2. Then in 2014 and 2015, the score improved to a 51.4 and 54.9 respectively.

**Table 2: District Performance Scores (2011-2014)**

<b>200 Point System</b>	<b>200 Point System (Grading Scale Change for “D” and “F” only)</b>		<b>Grading Scale Change New 150 Point System</b>					
<b>2011 DPS</b>	<b>2012 Letter Grade</b>	<b>2012 DPS</b>	<b>2013 Annual DPS Letter Grade</b>	<b>2013 Annual DPS</b>	<b>2014 Annual DPS Letter Grade</b>	<b>2014 Annual DPS</b>	<b>2015 Annual DPS Letter Grade</b>	<b>2015 Annual DPS</b>
58	F	71.8	F	45.2	D	51.4	D	54.9

Based on the state’s grading scale for 2010-2011, the 13.8 increase would have placed the district in the “D” category. However, in 2011-2012, the state revised the “D” and “F” categories of the grading scale to reflect 0-74.9 as an “F” and 75-89.9 as a “D”. As a result, the district remained an “F”. Then in 2012-2013, the grading scale changed yet again from a 200-point scale to a 150-point scale. Table 3 below lists the grading scale changes from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013.

**Table 3: Grading Scale (2011-2013)**

<b>2010-2011 Grading Scale</b>		<b>2011-2012 Grading Scale</b>		<b>2012-2013 Grading Scale</b>	
A	120-200	A	120-200	A	100-150
B	105-119.9	B	105-119.9	B	85-99.9
C	90.0-104.9	C	90.0-104.9	C	70-84.9
D	65-89.9	D	75-89.9*	D	50-69.9
F	0-64.9	F	0-74.9*	F	0-49.9

### **Absolute Achievement vs. Individual Improvement**

A proficiency rate on a single assessment is not an adequate measure for students who enter school behind their peers. Poverty, special education status, and even the greater distance from enrichment opportunities are some reasons why groups of students in one district may start behind their peers in other districts. In the past, St. Helena was in a unique position in the accountability system in that third graders entered the testing regime well below average but did not have the subsequent grades past fourth to show progress. Furthermore, since it did not have an eighth grade in 2014, St. Helena still did not benefit from the Dropout Credit Accumulation Index which in every case pulls the District Average up slightly.

### **Suggestions for Equality**

- The current accountability system neither identifies the academic progress taking place in schools serving the neediest learners, nor does it inform the public about the specific challenges faced by many of these small, rural schools. Outcomes for rural schools should be analyzed and published as a cohort comparison.
- Absolute achievement and growth models could be included on a report card as separate items, and any growth model data must be accompanied by an indication of the margin of error.
- Policy makers should educate the public about the limitations of the standardized tests as it relates to large affluent schools and small rural school comparisons.
- An expanded school performance metric for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade that also rewards additional contextual school indicators (attendance, positive discipline interventions, better

graduation indexes, district accreditation, etc.) would more equitably determine the effectiveness and impact of schools and school districts upon student learning.

- Award Carnegie Units to 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> graders who score “Fair” on End-of-Course exams in American History and Biology.
- Increase the amount of points earned for 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who score “Good” or “Excellent” on End-of-Course exams.
- Set a number range for students who meet expectations within the Progress Point system. Allow the aggregate results of two or more years to be considered when the minimum number is not met in a single year. This would allow for “B” schools that were ineligible for Progress Points because they had too few non-proficient students in the past, to become eligible in the future.
- Allow students to earn credit within the school performance score calculator immediately after completing an Advanced Placement course rather than waiting until their senior year.
- In light of our size, allow for performance data to be shown in raw numbers and percentages OR the State Department investigate proven ways to adjust for the impact of population size as they establish Target Points on each indicator.
- An accountability system that monitors progress fall to spring, perhaps relative to an expected summer gain baseline (Downey, von Hippel, and Hughes 2005) would be more appropriate for gauging a school’s effectiveness.

## Conclusion

Educators in St. Helena are aware of the compelling changes needed, and that are currently being offered as a solution to the educational crisis that exists in the state of Louisiana. That change is even more critical and compelling for those of us in districts suffering the fate of being located in a small, rural, low-socioeconomic area with low student performance.

We fully believe that as a unified school community, the St. Helena Parish School District is now, more than ever, capable of addressing the many issues that have hindered progress in the past. This was proven during the last election cycle where both proposed tax measures passed. St. Helena has a renewed sense of purpose, a heightened awareness of where we have been, and a new outlook on where we are able to go forward. This hope is reflected back to us from those most concerned with the future of our children and our schools. Their hope must be realized. Bolstered by the confidence our community has in our expertise, passion and care for the education of the children in our charge, it is our duty to seek a fair and equitable accountability system for all teachers and children.

We will continue to make improvements in the classroom, provide our teachers with the support needed to be effective, and give our community reasons to have confidence in our public school system as we strive to see our vision come into fruition.

We demand an accountability system designed to acknowledge our hard-fought progress, our noble profession, and our professional capabilities. We acknowledge that the respect and dignity of our chosen profession are both cherished and hard-earned. For us, failure is not an option.

**Suggested Readings:**

Alexander, Karl L., Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda S. Olson. 2001. "Schools, Achievement and Inequality: A Seasonal Perspective." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23:171-91.

Bassett, H. "Bassett Examines Progress Point Influence on School Performance Scores". [www.louisianaeducator.blogspot.com](http://www.louisianaeducator.blogspot.com). January 7, 2016.

Beck, F. D., & Shoffstall, G. W. 2005. How do rural schools fare under a high stakes testing regime? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20(14).

Berliner, D. 2009. *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.

Coles, G. 2008/2009. Hunger, academic success, and the hard bigotry of indifference. *Rethinking Schools* 23 (2).

Deshotels, M., 2016. "Response to the white paper: Equitable Accountability for All". [www.louisianaeducator.com](http://www.louisianaeducator.com). January 25, 2016.

Downey, Douglas B., Paul T. von Hippel, and Melanie Hughes, 2005. "Are 'Failing' Schools Really Failing? Using Seasonal Comparisons to Evaluate School Effectiveness." Presented at the American Sociological Association, Education Section, August, Montreal, Canada.

Duke, N. 2000. For the rich it's richer: Print experiences and environments offered to children in very low and very high-socioeconomic status first-grade classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal* 37(2): 441-478.

Evans, M, Kelley, J. Sikora, J. and Treiman, D. (2010) Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28 (2): 171-197

Geiser, S. and Santelices, M.V., 2007. Validity of high-school grades in predicting student success beyond the freshman year: High-school record vs. standardized tests as indicators of four-year college outcomes. *Research and Occasional Papers Series: CSHE6.07*, University of California, Berkeley.

Kohn, A. 1999. *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin;

Kohn, A. 2000. *The Case Against Standardized Testing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Krashen, S., Lee, SY, and McQuillan, J. 2010. An analysis of the PIRLS (2006) data: Can the school library reduce the effect of poverty on reading achievement? *CSLA (California School Library Association) Journal*, 34 (1).

Lindsay, J. 2010. Children's Access to Print Material and Education-Related Outcomes: Findings from a Meta-Analytic Review. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.

Neuman, S.B. & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 1, 8-26.

Nichols, S., Glass, G., and Berliner, D. 2006. High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability increase student learning? *Education Policy Archives* 14(1).

Payne, K. and Biddle, B. 1999. Poor school funding, child poverty, and mathematics achievement. *Educational Researcher* 28 (6): 4-13.

Shavelson, Richard J. Linn Robert L., Eva L., Helen F., Darling-Hammond, Linda Shepard, Barton, Paul E., Haertel, Edward, Ravitch, Diane and Rothstein, Richard. 2010. Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers, Economic Policy Institute.

Schubert, F. and Becker, R. 2010. Social inequality of reading literacy: A longitudinal analysis with cross-sectional data of PIRLS 2001 and PISA 2000 utilizing the pair wise matching procedure. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 29:109-133.

White, K. 1982. The relation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. *Psychological Bulletin* 9: 461-81.