


@HEALTH & WELL-BEING ISSUE

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SUMMER 2009

FOCUS: EDUCATION - FIVE YEARS OF SYSTEMIC INITIATIVE

Accelerating Student Achievement



Five years ago, The Rapides Foundation asked all nine school districts in its service area to begin working more closely than ever. It was a bold step. The Foundation had a new approach to improving education in Central Louisiana, but it would not work without district participation.

The Foundation was already working with individual schools in literacy and math. Since 1999 it had been providing training and tools so teachers could improve their skills to advance student achievement.

W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School teacher Carol Kelly watches fifth-graders use a new interactive whiteboard to manipulate items electronically. It teaches students to think outside the box and discover new ideas on their own.

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Systemic Initiative in Education

Student Achievement

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The Foundation purposefully started small to gain trust and build relationships in the educational communities. But to make the most impact, the work needed to move system-wide. As a result, the Foundation dedicated \$10 million over the next five years for its new Systemic Initiative in Education (SIE). Districts began receiving their grants in the fall of 2004.

WORK MOVES TO DISTRICT LEVEL

"We were ready to take the next logical step, to expand the Foundation's scope and work directly with the school districts," Foundation President and CEO Joe Rosier said. "They are at the heart of any meaningful educational reform if it's to be sustained over the long term."

With the shift from school- to district-level funding, one constant remained. It was the Foundation's belief that professional development is the key to educational success. Districts were required to make this a top priority. "Studies confirm that the quality of teaching is the most important school-based factor that influences student achievement" Rosier said.



Magnet Facilitator Laurie Croom works with W.O. Hall Elementary third graders on a science discovery project.



Marguerita Krause,
District Coordinator for Catahoula Parish

The SIE grants focused on math and literacy with each district customizing its own plans tailored to its needs. The plans ranged from enhancing math and literacy content to providing training for highly skilled educators to mentor less-experienced teachers. Many districts established Professional Learning Communities, where teams of teachers at the school and district level led instructional improvement.

Each district was assigned a designated educational leader to help coordinate the SIE efforts and ensure that grant dollars were maximized. Marguerita Krause, the district coordinator for Catahoula Parish, said the transition from school- to district-level grants was seamless, thanks to the Foundation's extensive groundwork leading up to the Systemic Initiative.

Systemic Initiative in Education



In this 2004 photo, Oberlin High School Principal Ronald Meaux works with a student in the school's reading lab.

"The focus of our effort has been on increasing student performance in math and language arts through focused instruction and improved leadership skills. We had already begun that work through the Foundation's individual grants to schools, so this was a natural transition," Krause said.

OUTSIDE EXPERTISE VITAL

Wilma Hamilton Delp, the Foundation's lead technical adviser for the Systemic Initiative, saw an increase in the level of interaction among the districts. A former superintendent of the Sarasota County (Fla.) school system, Delp has

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Systemic Initiative in Education

Student Achievement

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worked in Cenla's schools since 1999. When the Foundation started investing in education, it recruited outside education experts like Delp to work one-on-one with the schools.

Diane Marcantel, Allen Parish's district coordinator, appreciated the Foundation's support and expertise provided by the district's designated technical assistant. The parish was able to meet its academic goals faster because of the Systemic Initiative, she said. "The additional resources have accelerated our ability to improve student performance and achieve our professional development goals. We knew that teachers had to learn new and more effective strategies, had to constantly grow and change and be flexible in order to meet the changing needs of their students."

Delp praised the trust between the districts and the Foundation. "I've worked with school systems throughout the country, and this is a unique relationship. The districts know the Foundation has their best interests at heart. The Foundation has high expectations but provides the expertise and tools the districts need to keep pushing to improve student achievement."

The Foundation was determined to continue looking for ways to bring the districts together. With their SIE efforts under way, the districts were now eager to begin sharing their knowledge and successes. To help, the Foundation organized networking sessions that allowed teachers to learn from their peers what was working in classrooms all over Central Louisiana, not just their own parishes.

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Diane Marcantel (standing), District Education Coordinator for Allen Parish, instructs teachers Carlos LaFargue and Erica Barnett at a 2005 seminar.

Systemic Initiative in Education

"Every district saw leadership development as a top priority."

Joe Rosier, President
The Rapides Foundation



Members of Lakeview High School's 2007-08 Advanced Leadership Team included (l-r): teacher Joanne Yankowski, Principal Kerry Braden, and teachers Meghan Graham, Bob Kellogg, and Marsha Sanders.

Systemic Initiative in Education

Student Achievement

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FOUNDATION SUPPORTS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The Foundation also began exploring the best ways to train current and future leaders in education. "Every district saw leadership development as a top priority," Rosier said.

It developed two separate leadership academies – one for new and aspiring leaders and another for leaders with more advanced skills. And in two years, more than 200 educators have attended the academies, which are taught by nationally recognized experts from the University of Washington's Center

for Educational Leadership and the Urban Learning and Leadership Center.

Kerry Braden, principal at Cloutierville Elementary/Middle School, said the Advanced Leadership Development Institute helped him survive his first year as a principal. "It was a great first year, and I have The Rapides Foundation to thank for a lot of that," he said. "It was a challenge. It would have been really hard to make it without the support."

Jennifer Dismer, an assistant principal at Avoyelles High School, appreciated the teaching style at the academy for new administrators. "Participants were active learners with the presenters acting as facilitators. It enabled us to interact and share their experiences, bringing our learning to a higher level and making it more likely that we would be able to implement the strategies that were shared with us."

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR FUTURE SUCCESS

The Foundation is already laying the groundwork for the future. While the 2008-09 school year marked the end of the Systemic Initiative grants, it is now working with the districts to start a new focus – on science,

technology, engineering and math (STEM), and career and technical education (CTE).

All nine districts are beginning an intensive planning phase and will implement multi-year STEM projects starting in the 2010-11 school year. The goal is to design programs based on what research shows is working



The Foundation established The Orchard Foundation in 2004 as another way to improve education in Central Louisiana. Orchard provides organizational support to ensure The Rapides Foundation's education goals are met. Orchard oversees the leadership academies and works to bring in grant funds to enhance local education efforts.

Systemic Initiative in Education



Leadership Academy participants from Avoyelles High School included Brent Whiddon, Jennifer Dismar and Scott Bailus.

in schools across the United States, so Cenla students will be equipped to compete globally as the job market shifts to these skills.

Meanwhile, the focus on career and technical education will address Central Louisiana's need for a highly skilled and qualified workforce. CTE gives high school students technical

training to prepare them for immediate job placement after graduation.

During this next year of planning, the leadership academies will continue. The focus will be on topics to prepare educators for the leadership roles that will be needed when the STEM and CTE grants are awarded.

As the districts and Foundation prepare for this transition, they are proud of the many accomplishments that have taken place since the Systemic Initiative grants were awarded in 2004. Districts are now working together at all levels. What many doubted could happen has become a reality. There's now a true camaraderie and shared vision to improve education in all parishes and for every student in Central Louisiana.

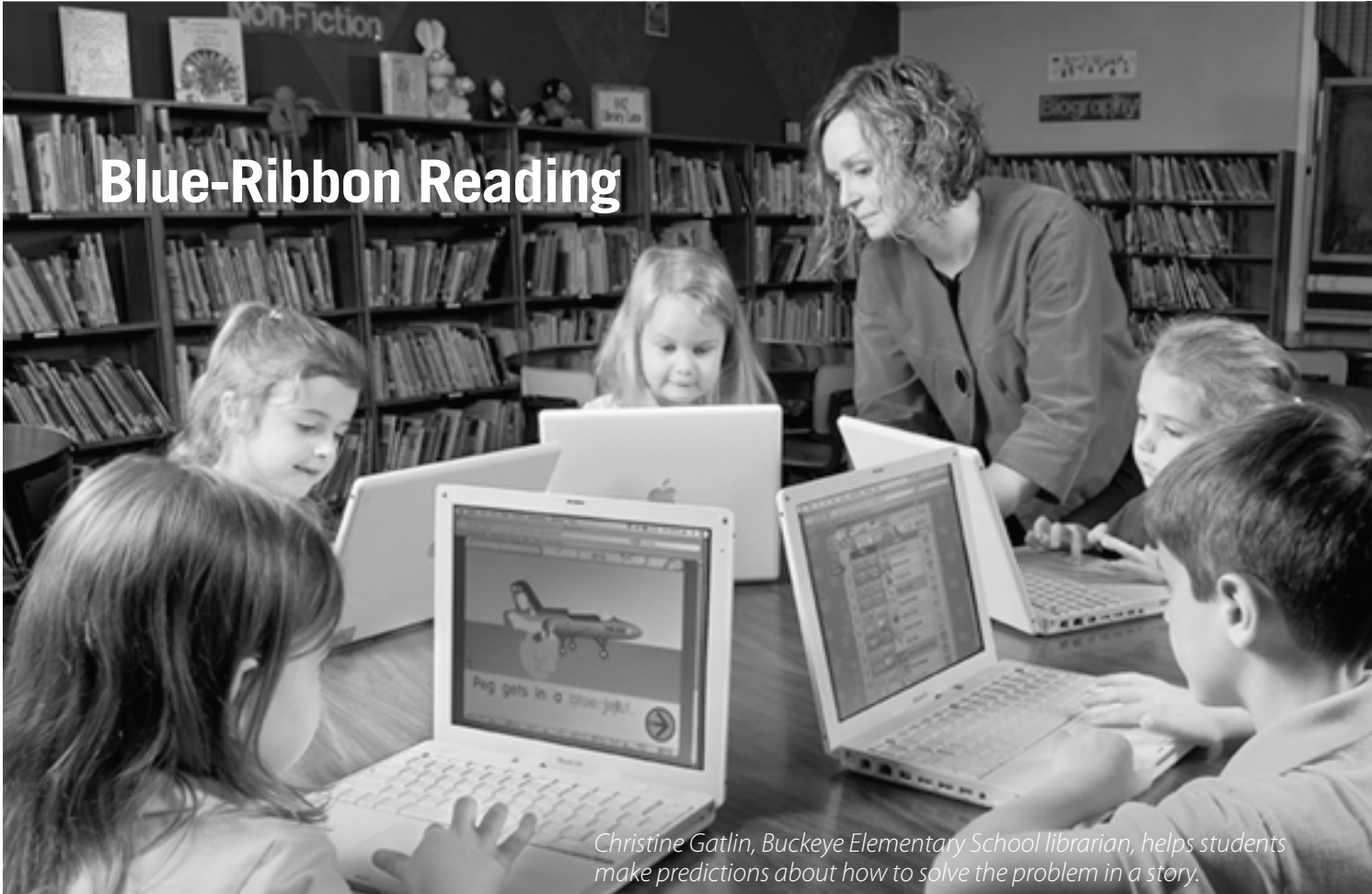


Case Studies: Next

Over the Systemic Initiative in Education's five-year history, we have seen great work in numerous Central Louisiana public schools. From exemplary leadership to innovative classrooms, schools are doing their part to improve student achievement. On the next pages, we would like to recognize just a few.

Buckeye Elementary School

Blue-Ribbon Reading



Christine Gatlin, Buckeye Elementary School librarian, helps students make predictions about how to solve the problem in a story.

Case Study: Buckeye Elementary School

For Buckeye Elementary School, it's been four consecutive years of exemplary growth thanks to the three Rs: reading, reading and more reading. In 2008 this pre-K through second grade school in rural Rapides Parish was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. Buckeye has seen tremendous growth in student academic performance across all subjects and grade

levels, thanks to a laser-like focus on reading and writing skills.

Principal Susan Bates said that rather than trying to "do it all," Buckeye staff analyzed more than six years of data and discovered deficits in reading skills. "We knew reading is fundamental to success in every subject," she said. "If we could show improvement there, then student achievement would rise in all areas."

Teachers are committed to engaging every

Buckeye Elementary School

“We knew reading is fundamental to success in every subject. If we could show improvement there, then student achievement would rise in all areas.”

Susan Bates, Principal
Buckeye Elementary School

student. Using resources from the Foundation’s Systemic Initiative, they put in place a rigorous staff development plan tailored to the goals they planned to achieve in reading. Teachers visited other schools and researched the ones that were making great strides to bring up test scores. Then they developed a plan for Buckeye using all the best research-based strategies.

Bates and her staff have three overarching strategies: identify problems early, implement strong writing/accelerated reading programs and foster a sense of community.

“Our faculty constantly pores over the data, assessing strengths and weaknesses in their curriculum, as well as student performance,” said Bates. Teachers and administrators then work to identify any potential problems early so they can quickly address issues.

The school revamped the Accelerated



Kindergarten teacher Elizabeth Milliner helps a Buckeye Elementary student with reading skills.

Reader program that is based on a point system so it now rewards students for accuracy, not just the number of questions answered. This past school year the books were flying out of the library. Bates says students were lined up checking out books well before the opening bell. “We set goals and this school year surpassed it by over 2,000 points,” she proudly noted.

Faculty members also believe community involvement at Buckeye is a major key to success. They describe it as a “global concept.” What goes on outside the classroom impacts what is possible inside the classroom. There is a strong sense of community among the faculty and staff with 75 percent living within the area.

Bates feels that the strong community tie makes everyone invested in the school. “Parents are thrilled with the school’s success and how engaged their children are in learning,” she said.

The test scores and student achievement are generating notice outside the community. Bates said she’s getting more and more calls from people who are moving to the area. They ask, “Where does my family need to live so our children can attend Buckeye Elementary?”

Bates smiled and pictured even more students checking out books, and reading and reading.



Grant High School

Case Study: Grant High School

Mentoring To A Higher Standard

Grant High Senior Mentor Sarah Dean (center), works with freshmen (l-r) Zach Hernandez, John Hicks, David Hebert and Loren Hebert during their advisory period.

Principal Randy Crawford is passionate about making sure his students finish school and are prepared for the future. In 2009, 85 percent of the school's senior class graduated. That's well above the state and national averages.

Four years ago, Crawford spearheaded high school redesign efforts at his school with a major focus on ninth grade. Research shows that helping ninth-graders make a successful transition from middle school is critical to retention and graduation.

As part of this effort, Grant started *Advisory*, where ninth-graders form a unique community within the school. "Each student is assigned a mentor from a higher grade who is there to make sure they have a smooth transition both academically and socially," Crawford explained.

Advisory has other components, including an extensive orientation and teacher mentors. Both teachers and administrators continuously examine the ninth-graders' progress. There's also an electronic tracking system to monitor grades, absences, tardies and other warning signs that a student might be in academic or emotional distress. Crawford noted, "In addition we have lunch period interventions if needed, and after-school instruction time is offered daily when extra assistance is needed."

The program provides students reward points they can redeem at one of the most popular gathering sites on campus, the Cougar Café – an informal coffee shop that students have designed, painted and decorated.

Crawford said the focus on the ninth grade is part of an overall high school redesign effort that was fostered through the Foundation's

Grant High School

“We borrowed the best and customized it for our school, with a focus on rigor, relevance and relationship. The goal is to always ensure that students exit our school with college and career readiness knowledge and skills.”

Randy Crawford, Principal
Grant High School

Systemic Initiative. It provided an opportunity for staff to make site visits and receive training on what is working to improve student achievement in high schools.

“We borrowed the best and customized it for our school with a focus on rigor, relevance and relationship. The goal is to always ensure that students exit our school with college and career readiness knowledge and skills,” Crawford explained.

Grant High has implemented a curriculum that is challenging and provides support for all students to meet the higher standards. To make the curriculum relevant, students are offered personalized learning opportunities so they can better understand how their schoolwork is related to life and their goals after high school. Equally important is that students learn to build relationships with their classmates, teachers and community so they’re better prepared to make a successful transition when they graduate.

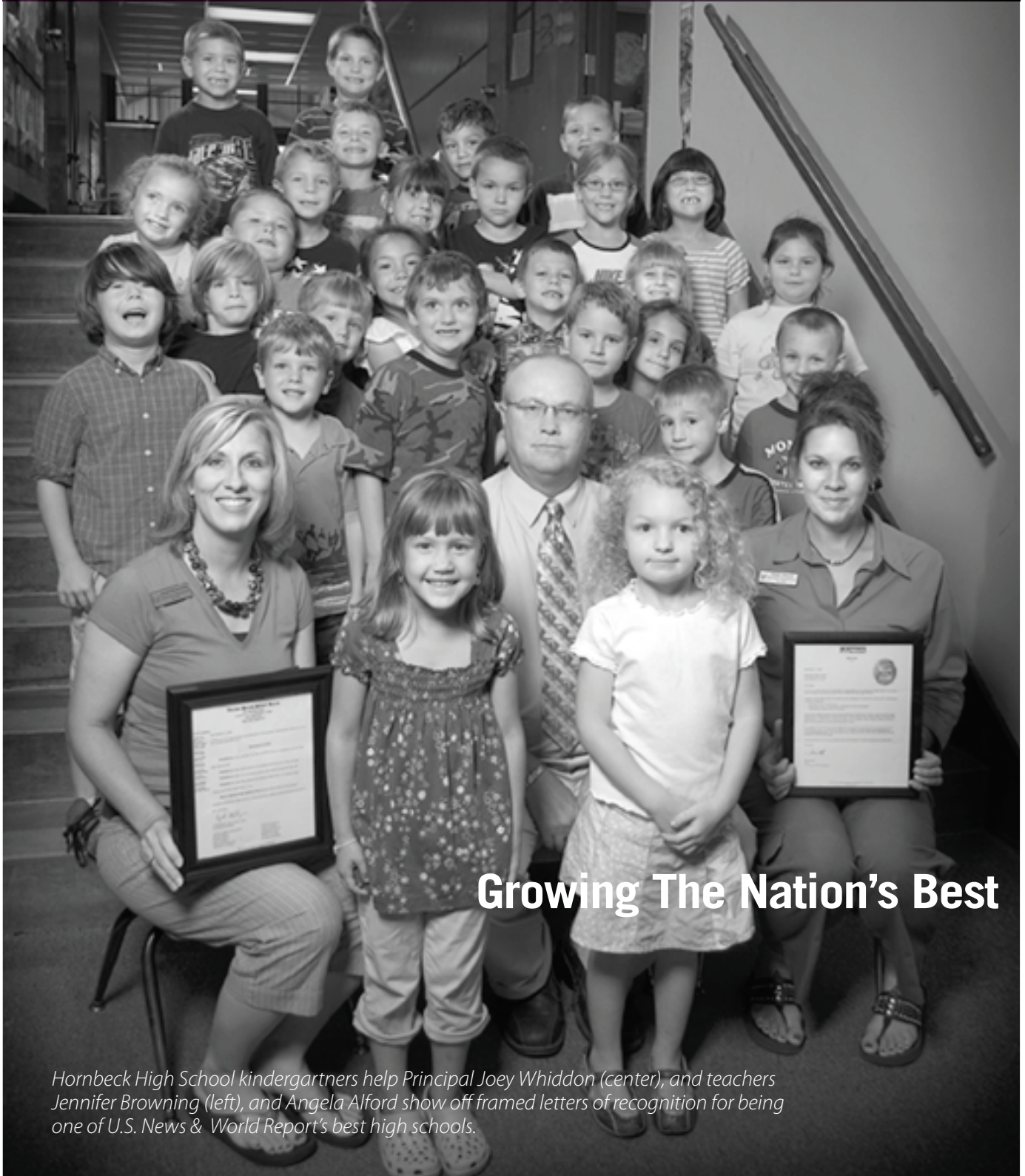
Crawford believes all these efforts will keep students motivated, and the numbers graduating will continue to grow. His enthusiasm does too. “Check back in the coming years. I’m proud we’re preparing 85 percent to meet the challenges ahead, but we’ll keep working. Our goal is to get our graduation rate to 100 percent.”



Teachers Kayla Courville and Steven Jones (back) serve ice cream to students in the Grant High School Cougar Café.

Hornbeck High School

Case Study: Hornbeck High School



Growing The Nation's Best

Hornbeck High School kindergartners help Principal Joey Whiddon (center), and teachers Jennifer Browning (left), and Angela Alford show off framed letters of recognition for being one of U.S. News & World Report's best high schools.

Hornbeck High School

People across the state and nation are taking notice of what's being accomplished at a rural K-12 school in Vernon Parish. Hornbeck High School has earned the Louisiana Department of Education's Pacesetter School designation, being recognized for showing three years or more of continual growth under the state's Accountability System. Just as impressive, from 2002-2007 students meeting state standards on the Graduate Exit Exam increased by 21 points.

Those achievements led U.S. News & World Report to name Hornbeck as one of the nation's best high schools for 2009. (See list of other winners from Central Louisiana on the back of this newsletter.)

Principal Joey Whiddon is modest about the gains in student achievement, and he points to his teachers, staff and parents as the driving force. "Our faculty is dedicated to implementing instructional initiatives that target specific areas of weakness." In turn they credit Whiddon's leadership skills and dedication as the main reasons it's possible to reach those goals.

Whiddon also strongly acknowledged The Rapides Foundation's Systemic Initiative in Education and The Orchard Foundation's Advanced Leadership Academy for his school's improvement. He has participated in both programs, and noted, "The Leadership Academy has provided research-based, effective strategies that I've implemented at Hornbeck."

One of those approaches is to empower teachers to take control of their classrooms, to use creative learning strategies. "I know

effective teaching skills, how to recognize them. I'm confident in our staff so I let them be creative, try new things, whatever it takes to reach the students." He also offers teachers opportunities to attend professional development courses like those offered by the Foundation, as well as others that might be available.

Another key ingredient to Hornbeck's success is giving teachers time to work together, share ideas and resources.

When Whiddon became principal six years ago that wasn't happening. But now, because of his efforts, teachers in grades K-6 have at least 35 minutes every day to plan and collaborate. He believes it's vital to their success. "By creatively rescheduling and restructuring the school day, now every teacher has daily planning time." That time is critical because it encourages and allows administrators and teachers to identify students' strengths and weaknesses so instruction can be targeted to meet specific deficiencies.

Whiddon was convinced he could bring about even more change at Hornbeck if teachers could observe effective teaching methods firsthand. So he approached the Vernon Parish School Board, which endorsed his concept of the Student Engagement Model. It replicates the Foundation's Leadership Academy.

Because of Whiddon's quiet but steady leadership, experts will now go to Vernon Parish schools to demonstrate best teaching practices. And teachers will be able to observe their own students responding, so they can learn even more strategies to keep students motivated and achievement soaring.



W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School

Project-based learning



Former W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School Principal Alison Andrews works with third-graders to simulate owl dissections for a science project.

Case Study: W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School

Walking through the halls of this pre-K through fifth grade school in Rapides Parish, you're immediately struck by how animated the students are. There's lots of activity and questions, and they aren't always sitting quietly in their seats. And that's the way it's supposed to be – students who are actively engaged.

Teachers work with students to be active learners. They're proving this method called project-based learning can reap big dividends.

"It's a strategy of student engagement that

encourages students to become responsible for their own learning," said Alison Andrews, who was principal up until 2009. She is now principal at Paradise Elementary. "The projects are designed to make them curious to help build critical thinking skills." It encourages social engagement where students work cooperatively through discussions, problem solving and study with peers. The teachers are always active leaders and partners in their students' efforts.

This approach is the reason the school has gained almost 30 points on its School

W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School

“It’s a strategy of student engagement that encourages students to become responsible for their own learning.”

Alison Andrews, Former Principal
W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet School

Performance Scores in three years. It is remarkable progress for any school, especially one at the elementary level with a high poverty/high minority population – 98 percent of the students are eligible for the free/reduced lunch program.

When Andrews took over as principal four years ago, she had to fill 14 teaching positions, more than half the staff. She saw a unique opportunity to recruit teachers who would be creative and flexible. They needed to be open to embracing the project-based learning model. Andrews notes, “They’ve never looked back. Once these teachers saw how students could become active learners, they just became more determined for them to become as engaged as possible.”

The school has also adopted a philosophy of meeting not just the learning requirements of a child, but also the social, emotional and cognitive needs. The administration and faculty believe learning will occur when all of these are met. So if a student appears stressed or their family is undergoing a crisis, the guidance counselor and teacher work together to develop appropriate interventions.

From the beginning, collaboration among the staff was critical. Teachers continuously communicate with each other about successes and challenges to meet the needs of all students. Staff work closely using a concept called Professional Learning Communities.

Teachers collaborate to determine appropriate goals for students in each grade, and as they continue to the next level. Andrews stressed, “It’s not enough to follow students in one grade. Our teachers are constantly monitoring their gaps in achievement and working to overcome any shortfalls.”

This small school is beating the odds. Student achievement has soared. Teachers are working together to truly become co-facilitators in the classrooms as students are encouraged for their efforts to pursue learning in a way that is most meaningful to them.



W.O. Hall Elementary Magnet teacher Michelle Davis works with a student on a group experiment to separate mixtures and explore the nature of dissolving and resulting solutions.

Best High Schools 2009

▶ Among The Nation's Best Schools

U.S. News & World Report – in collaboration with School Evaluation Services, a K-12 education and data research and analysis business that provides parents with education data on schoolmatters.com – analyzed academic and enrollment data from more than 21,000 public high schools to find the very best across the country.



Congratulations to our Systemic Initiative partners.

SILVER LEVEL

RAPIDES PARISH — **Bolton High School**, Alexandria

BRONZE LEVEL

AVOYELLES PARISH — **Avoyelles High School**, Moreauville

Marksville High School, Marksville

CATAHOULA PARISH — **Harrisonburg High School**, Harrisonburg

Sicily Island High School, Sicily Island

VERNON PARISH — **Anacoco High School**, Anacoco

Hornbeck High School, Hornbeck

Pitkin High School, Pitkin

WINN PARISH — **Calvin High School**, Calvin

Winnfield Senior High School, Winnfield



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