



HEALTH & WELL-BEING issue

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FOCUS: EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Next Logical Step



Ronald Meaux, Principal at Oberlin Elementary, works with a student in the reading lab.

The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative is in its sixth year of operations and a major shift in strategy is occurring. "It's all extremely encouraging; we're really starting to move now,"

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Education Initiative

The Next Logical Step

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responded Joe Rosier, The Rapides Foundation's President and CEO, when asked recently about the Initiative's progress. "And what a learning experience it's been for all of us," he continued. "We're beginning to see the fruits of our labor, and the Foundation is now ready to take the next logical step; that is, expand our scope and work directly with the school districts. It's called the Systemic Initiative in Education." (See related story, page 8).

The approach at the beginning of the Education Initiative was to award grants to individual schools in Central Louisiana. "Although it was understood that we would eventually need to work at the district level to truly achieve education reform, we weren't positioned at that time to tackle the complexity at the school district level. Confronting system-wide issues was clearly beyond our capacity," explained Rosier. "We needed to start smaller and build relationships with the education community, while at the same time gaining an understanding of their concerns and needs."

Participating schools were encouraged to develop programs with new educational approaches that would result in better student achievement. These school-level grants, totaling close to \$8 million were eventually awarded to

over 100 schools. They were presented in three cycles and extended over a five-year period. Cycle 1 has just been completed; Cycle 2 ends in 2005; Cycle 3 in 2006. "Once all these school-level grants draw to a close, the Systemic Initiative will be in full force," said Rosier. "All our resources will go directly to the school districts, not to individual schools."

One constant through the evolution of the Education Initiative has been The Rapides Foundation's belief that professional development is key to its success. "Absolutely," agreed Rosier. "There are numerous studies that confirm that the quality of teaching is the single most important factor influencing student achievement. To that end, we have offered a number of seminars and networking activities for teachers and principals so they could build knowledge as well as share ideas and experiences."

As the interest and participation of local educators began to grow, the Foundation established the Educators Leadership Institute. (See related story, page 4). ELI brought together superintendents, principals, teachers, and school administrators in Central Louisiana to hear from and meet with recognized educators from across the country. They were able to learn about some

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"It's logical, and ultimately we have concluded, it's healthy for Central Louisiana."

Joe Rosier, President and CEO, The Rapides Foundation

Education Initiative

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of the latest programs and statistical information currently available and how they might incorporate these ideas and information services into their school districts.

"ELI has helped prepare school and district level leadership to face new high stakes instructional and accountability challenges," said Rosier. "Leadership skills were developed, teams were formed, and the ELI 'phenomenon' as we think of it, swept over these educators. What skills and knowledge they took away from ELI, they brought back to their schools and districts and introduced these concepts and methods into all levels of their education system."

"ELI has been an incredibly popular program," Rosier continued, "and has helped accelerate The

Rapides Foundation's involvement at the district level."

The Rapides Foundation plans to invest up to \$10 million over the next five years into its Systemic Initiative in Education. Grants will be awarded only for a single school year and then continued for up to five years if the districts receive a favorable annual program and progress review.

"The Rapides Foundation remains committed to our Education Initiative," Rosier summed up. "We believe we can make a significant contribution in creating an innovative, results driven, educational environment for our young people. It's logical, and ultimately we have concluded, it's healthy for Central Louisiana."

Lynda McCullough, principal at Fairview High School works with a student in the Accelerated Reader program.



Educators Leadership Institute



Building ELI Unity

Teachers, principals and superintendents participated in the ELI conference held at Tall Timbers in April 2004.

The Educators Leadership Institute was designed to bring together a group of Central Louisiana educators (superintendents, principals, teachers, office staff), to share experiences from their school districts, and learn about some of the best innovative educational practices from respected education leaders across the country. From there, each ELI participant, and the school district "teams" that were formed, were encouraged to begin applying what they were learning at these ELI sessions back in their schools and districts - passing that information on to their colleagues.

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Educators Leadership Institute

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In Natchitoches Parish, Superintendent of Schools Elwanda Murphy attended the first cohort of ELI (a one-year series of four, three-day sessions), and couldn't wait to begin incorporating what she and her team had learned into their district. "I kept thinking, 'We don't need to leave anybody out. We need to bring the whole parish into this.' So that June, right after ELI-1, I brought all principals and all central office supervisors together for a two-day strategic planning session structured around what we learned in ELI."

So receptive was the staff and teachers to what Superintendent Murphy and other educators from Natchitoches Parish brought back from ELI, she was urged to attend the second cohort along with a new group of educators from Natchitoches Parish. "They all said how important they thought it was that I was there."

"It made me more keenly aware that it is my responsibility to drive the education initiative in this parish; to have a global vision of the direction we need to go."

*Steve Bartlett,
Superintendent of Schools in Winn Parish*



Teacher Alanna Bradford, South Polk Elementary School, is interviewed at the ELI Conference.

Steve Bartlett, Superintendent of Schools in Winn Parish also attended ELI-2. He and his district's ELI team then spread the word of what they learned in ELI with their colleagues. "ELI allowed us to get beyond the confines of our particular small community and see what's going on elsewhere. ELI has allowed us to pull together our leadership capacity and focus in a more concentrated way on high quality teaching and learning to improve student achievement."

He also feels ELI has helped him in his role as Superintendent. "It made me more keenly aware that it is my responsibility to drive the education initiative in this parish; to have a global vision of the direction we need to go. ELI heightened my understanding that I am an encourager. And probably more than ever before, I realized that I need to evaluate, assess where we're going and validate that we're going in the right direction, and if we happen not to be going in the right direction, make some changes."

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Educators Leadership Institute

Building ELI Unity

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Both superintendents agreed ELI has opened up some valuable networking opportunities. "I have been able to collaborate with other superintendents and leaders in other places and share what we're doing as well as listen and pull from what they're doing," said Superintendent Bartlett, while Superintendent Murphy commented, "We were working with other parishes and those parishes have very similar hurdles and are trying to reach the same goals that we are. That was a big help."

They also agree that ELI has accelerated improvements in each school district and brought a unity of purpose to all levels of education. "I don't think we could be anywhere nearly as focused as a parish as we are at this point without the key principals and key teacher leaders uniting to work together," said Superintendent Murphy.

as she assessed the contributions of ELI. "I think we have a consensus of where and how we want to reach our goal, and I'm not sure we could have gotten this far this quickly without ELI helping us get there."

"We're all one," said Superintendent Bartlett. "We're working together as a learning community and we've even expanded into our community at large. We're all on the same level. We're working at the same purpose, and that is to determine what's best for our students. That collaborative culture we're beginning to develop is paying off."

Through its two cohorts, ELI has infused an energy and momentum into the educational environment of Central Louisiana and given educators a unified goal and the means to improve student achievement through professional leadership development. ELI, as Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation has remarked, has also accelerated this latest move to the Systemic Initiative. ELI has been a valuable and necessary tool in the effort to significantly alter and strengthen the educational systems of Central Louisiana. The two cohorts are over, but the ELI "experience" has become part of the educational climate and continues to grow and be felt all across the school districts of Central Louisiana.



Cecil Picard, State Superintendent of Education receives award recognizing his dedication to Louisiana's education accountability program. Pictured Left to Right: Ronald Lofton, Catahoula Parish Superintendent, Cary McGuffee, LaSalle Parish Superintendent, Michael Doucet, Allen Parish Superintendent, Joe Rosier, President & CEO, The Rapides Foundation, Cecil Picard, Louisiana State Superintendent of Education, Cindy Gillespie, Vernon Parish Superintendent, Martha Bates, Winn Parish Board Member, Elwanda Murphy, Natchitoches Parish Superintendent, and Bob McLamore, Grant Parish Superintendent.

Educators Leadership Institute



ELI Conference at Tall Timbers inspires educators



Through ELI, The Rapides Foundation has established an effective process for promoting and supporting educational improvement in the schools and districts of its nine-parish region. ELI was designed to offer educators new ways to think about how to improve teaching and learning. It encourages school leaders to put those good ideas into practice.

Two important strategic pieces have been put into place to help educators in Central Louisiana keep steady in their work to improve education. The Rapides Foundation has launched the Systemic Initiative in Education to continue to strengthen district leadership teams as they accept direct responsibility for planning and implementing system-wide changes in schools and districts. A local education fund, The Orchard Foundation, has been created to generate broad community support within the region for education improvement and to encourage, support, and direct reforms.

Systemic Initiative Plans

Plans for the Future



Fairview High School teacher Pylla Turner presents a trophy to a first grade student for reading 100 books independently. Students who earned an Independent Reader Certification for Accelerated Reader received Dog Tags. Students in first grade read independently every day for 30 minutes. Students also read with a buddy.

School districts are critical to the success of schools. School districts are also critical to the success of The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative and its Systemic Initiative.

The State of Louisiana holds each school district responsible for seeing to it that all students meet the "content standards" established by the Louisiana Department of Education. Districts are at the center of instructional delivery. Decisions made at the district level affect schools' learning climate, personnel practices, instructional programs, morale, and the capacity of schools to meet state content standards.

"That's why we are moving to the Systemic Initiative," said Joe Rosier, The Rapides Foundation's President and CEO. "If the Foundation hopes to encourage and nurture instructional excellence, and significantly improve student performance, we must work with the entire system. It's the only way."

The nine school districts in The Rapides Foundation service area agree, and turned in their required five-year proposals to participate in The Rapides Foundation's Systemic Initiative in Education shortly after this past school year drew to a close.

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Systemic Initiative Plans

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Each proposal begins with a basic goal followed by a step-by-step plan detailing what the district wants to achieve and how these goals will be reached. It's all backed up by research and the district's own insights gained from The Rapides Foundation school level grants that have been in progress for a number of years. Proposals also include assessment procedures that can regularly evaluate the proposal's effectiveness.

Each proposal is unique, with its own focus, tailored to the needs of that district; but all sharing an underlying commitment to improve classroom instruction at all schools, in all classrooms, in all grades. The best way to achieve that is through professional development for teachers and leadership development for administrators.

In Allen and Vernon parishes for example, the concept of "Professional Learning Communities" is at the core of their systemic proposals. The National Staff Development Council Standards stress that continual, intellectual, and rigorous staff development is essential for anyone involved in student learning and further, that it is the responsibility of all educators to take an active part in improving their personal professional learning. Groups of teachers learning, sharing and interacting all across the districts.

David Hooper, the technology coordinator for Allen Parish, also serves as the district liaison between The Rapides Foundation and the Allen

Parish School District. "We were looking to improve our test scores," he said. "It always goes back to test scores, so we looked at different parishes that had high performance schools where test scores were increasing. We looked to see what they were doing and one thing we saw common in all those districts were Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), working like they should be working."

The PLC concept brings everyone together so that each grade level can share experiences and pursue common goals. "The first grade teachers meet together and the second grade teachers meet together and the third grade teachers meet together, and so on, and you discuss what's working and what's not working," Hooper explained.

Vernon Parish is also embracing the Professional Learning Communities concept; this is where the parish will spend the majority of its grant money. The focus of Professional Learning Communities is to help the teachers become better educators so they can implement the most productive teaching and learning in the classroom. Each school in Vernon Parish has its own PLC and there's also one for the district.

Literacy is also a large part of the Vernon Parish proposal where several reading and literacy programs have already been adopted into many of the parish school curriculums. Now they want to expand those programs parish-wide.

In Avoyelles Parish, reading is the focus of the systemic proposal. As the leadership group has talked and worked for the last two years, they have found the overriding need is in reading. So now everything becomes reading focused.

Leadership and professional development will also be an integral part of the systemic proposal in Avoyelles Parish. One of their strategies in this area involves principals. Avoyelles Parish principals will be involved in leadership training in order to facilitate better instruction at their schools. The teachers want them to support their efforts in the classroom and create an environment where teachers can learn together.

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Systemic Initiative Plans

Plans for the Future

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Wilma Hamilton is a retired Sarasota, Florida superintendent who now is a consultant to schools in Virginia, Texas, and Florida. She has served as The Rapides Foundation's Technical Assistant to several Rapides Parish schools for the last five years, and recently helped the district develop its systemic proposal. "I think it's the big picture; the thinking about what works," said Hamilton, "and asking these questions: If we do these things, will it produce success? How do we know that? What thinking have we done, what research have we done to tell us this is a proven technique that is going to have a positive impact on students?"

Professional development is also a large component of the Rapides Parish proposal. Indeed, professional development, along with leadership, is a major part of all the school district proposals. "It's all about the expertise of your staff. It's all about the person who stands in front of the child or works with that child every day," Hamilton said, adding; "The only way school districts ever really change is to change what the people who work with those children know and are able to do."

"It's all about the expertise of your staff. It's all about the person who stands in front of the child or works with that child every day."

Wilma Hamilton has served as Technical Assistant to several Rapides Parish schools for the last five years.



East Leesville Elementary second grade students in C.A.T.S. Curriculum Alignment to The Standards, with Laura Clark, Vernon Parish School System Curriculum Supervisor and (right) Debbie Clark, Principal at East Leesville Elementary.

According to Hamilton, the Rapides Parish systemic proposal incorporates some of the instructional techniques adapted from an education model from Texas that have successfully raised student achievement. All principals in the parish along with their lead teachers will meet to learn about these techniques. "Then they will go back and train the staff at their school so that everybody every step of the way is getting similar language and similar information and therefore, everyone is moving the mission."

Proposals from all the parishes in Central Louisiana are complete. The Rapides Foundation's Systemic Initiative in Education is ready to begin implementation. The future of our children and indeed all of Central Louisiana is looking brighter.



Empowering today's teachers. Educating tomorrow's leaders.



Passing the Baton

Growing the Seeds of Education

*Linda Bordelon, Executive Director
of The Orchard Foundation*

The Rapides Foundation has been intensely involved in developing its Education Initiative for these past six years. Now, with the advent of the Systemic Initiative, the Foundation is passing the baton, with a three-year grant, to its offspring – The Orchard Foundation.

At the outset, The Rapides Foundation recognized that the Education Initiative would eventually grow too large and complex for the organization to handle. There was a need for another entity, focused solely on education, to promote the services that changing schools and districts now require. A task force was formed, and eventually the idea to establish a local education fund was adopted.

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The Orchard Foundation

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That local education fund, The Orchard Foundation, has been created to generate broad community support within the Central Louisiana region for education improvement and to encourage, support, and direct reforms. The Orchard Foundation is an independent, nonprofit organization managed by a Board of Directors composed of educators, community and business leaders. Greg O'Quin, a local financial planning consultant, is Chairman of the Board. "The idea behind all this is that good teachers make good classrooms," he said, "and what can we do to make things better for teachers and ultimately for students."

Because The Orchard Foundation is independent of The Rapides Foundation, it is free to seek additional funding and grant opportunities from local, state and federal governments and private foundations. "This can create more money in that this entity can get some grants that The Rapides Foundation can't qualify for," explained O'Quin.

"The idea behind all this is that good teachers make good classrooms, and what can we do to make things better for teachers and ultimately for students?"

Greg O'Quin, local financial planning consultant and Chairman of the Board for The Orchard Foundation.

Linda Bordelon is the Executive Director of The Orchard Foundation. She brings to her new position a wide range of experience. In Avoyelles Parish Bordelon was a classroom teacher for 21 years. She later became an instructional specialist which led her to grant writing; "Over a period of about three years, I brought in close \$4 million for staff development." After that she became the guiding force in the establishment of a non-traditional charter school for Avoyelles Parish.

Now she is ready to apply her numerous skills to The Orchard Foundation. "My role is to serve as a resource for assisting school districts in the service area and improving the education system for Central Louisiana; and in the long term, linking that to economic development so that we will have an improvement in that area as well."

Barbara Volpe is a consultant to The Rapides Foundation. As director of a successful, local education fund in Denver, Volpe was able to offer invaluable insight and experience to the formation of The Orchard Foundation. "Local education funds generally provide a bridge between schools and communities," Volpe explained, "and therefore become a vehicle for community support and encouragement for improvement of the schools."

Volpe believes The Orchard Foundation can continue the momentum of The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative. "I think there is going to be great value added, and over time The Orchard Foundation can build up a budget and a staff that really can take the baton from The Rapides Foundation and carry it the next step of the way."

The moment Linda Bordelon took the baton from The Rapides Foundation she took off in a number of directions. She met with superintendents and business leaders in the area; she sent out surveys to board members and superintendents; she poured over past research on the Education Initiative; examined statistics.

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The Orchard Foundation



Greg O'Quin, local financial planning consultant and Chairman of the Board for The Orchard Foundation.

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She put it all together and presented it to The Orchard Foundation Board to help them determine a central focus. The result, "This community based nonprofit organization will work with both local school districts and communities in building new initiatives and gathering resources to improve Central Louisiana students' academic achievement; Leadership for educators - that is the priority for Orchard," stated

Bordelon, "specifically, to develop a Leadership Academy for Central Louisiana teachers and administrators."

Will it be anything like the extremely successful Educators Leadership Institute? "ELI is what was the beginning of a leadership academy," said Bordelon who is now happily planning a strategy to build on the earlier successes of ELI. "I am very much a project person. It's what I love to do. You tell me what results you want and I'll get you there."

Greg O'Quin is also pleased and hopeful about the future of this new local education fund. "We're trying to help teachers; make their lives better because better teachers make better classrooms and better students. We're not a solution to school board issues. This is about classrooms; this is about getting resources to people who are teaching kids."

Barbara Volpe, who has watched the progress of the Education Initiative since its early days remains impressed. "I think it's unbelievable. What The Rapides Foundation has gotten started is just a phenomenal project, and I hope that they can really disseminate the information and the learning that they've had from this all across the country because it's really quite remarkable. And now all that can be enhanced even further by The Orchard Foundation."

The Rapides Foundation thinks so, too. The Orchard Foundation is poised to take the Education Initiative far into the future. Its success is our communities' success.

"Leadership for educators – that is the priority for Orchard."

*Linda Bordelon, Executive Director of
The Orchard Foundation*



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CDW LearningLab

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CDW LearningLab

Community Development Works

Helping People Build Communities in Central Louisiana

Located on the first floor of The Rapides Foundation building in downtown Alexandria, the Community Development Works (CDW) Learning Lab is a place for citizens, community groups, and nonprofit organizations to access technical assistance, information, publications, and databases that support citizen-led community and nonprofit development efforts. The CDW Learning Lab will house a nonprofit and community development reference library and small computer center for prospect and program research. Included in the collection will be resources on Arts Management and Parish Nursing. The CDW Learning Lab is open Monday - Friday, 11:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. by appointment except on holidays. Please contact Amanda Weatherford at 318-443-7880 to schedule an appointment. The Learning Lab will be fully operational with regular business hours later in the year. Meanwhile, to learn more about the services offered through the Learning Lab visit www.communitydevelopmentworks.org.





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President/CEO:
Joseph R. Rosier, Jr., CPA, CFA

Editors:
Vicki Bernard
Annette Clark, MBA, CHE

Contributing Writer:
Anne L'Heureux

For additional copies or to be added

to the mailing list contact:

The Rapides Foundation
1101 Fourth Street, Suite 300
Alexandria, LA 71301

Tel: 318-443-3394
Fax: 318-443-8312
Toll Free: 1-800-994-3394

Internet: www.rapidesfoundation.org
e-mail: info@rapidesfoundation.org

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SYSTEMIC INITIATIVE IN EDUCATION

GRANT AWARD: \$6,000,000 (3 years)

To provide resources for districts to nurture new instructional approaches for administrators and teachers that produce high student achievement, improved graduation rates and a more successful transition from one level of schooling to the next and then on to college and/or career placement.

Current proposals include:

Allen Parish School Board

"Student Achievement Through Teaching Excellence"

Avoyelles Parish School Board

"Advancing Leadership & Instruction"

Catahoula Parish School Board

"Improving Instruction Through Leadership"

Grant Parish School Board

"Effective Instruction"

LaSalle Parish School Board

"LaSalle IMPACT"

Natchitoches Parish School Board

"Improving Student Achievement in Steps"

Rapides Parish School Board

"Differentiated Instruction K-12"

Vernon Parish School Board

"Fostering Professional Learning Communities"

Winn Parish School Board

"Professional Learning Communities"