

Parish school system faces extraordinary budget

challenge this year

Achievements and advancements are bright spots for schools



School Superintendent
Bill Spear

The biggest issue facing Livingston Parish Schools for the 2010-2011 school year is the same issue families are facing: the sluggish economy. Parish schools get part of their funding from a parish-wide sales tax, and with families reining in their spending due to an uncertain economy, the schools receive less money from taxes. On top of that, the Louisiana legislature, also facing budget shortfalls, has for the second year in a row, failed to include a 2.75 annual growth factor in MFP funds for local school districts. MFP (minimum foundation program) is a major source of state and local funding

for schools in Louisiana,

School Superintendent Bill Spear said, "In past years, state funding included a growth factor to take care of inflation, step increases in salaries and other expenses. This is the second year the legislature froze the MFP, and without that extra funding, I was compelled to recommend several budget cuts to compensate for the \$2.3 million we won't receive."

The cuts Spear proposed and the school board approved at the school board meeting July 8 included various measures that will help the school system cope with reduced revenues, including a freeze on hiring and overtime; a ban on the use of substitute teachers for middle and high schools in certain situations; recalculating the per-student formula for staffing for food service, custodial and office staff; eliminating the allowance for uniforms for cafeteria and custodial staff; reducing funds for custodial supplies, libraries and general school per-pupil allowances;

"I want to make it clear that we're not laying anyone off," stated Spear. "We will be reducing staff only through attrition and freezes. We also are not changing our teacher/pupil ratio which is so impor-

tant for effective teaching in the classroom."

The cuts are effective Aug. 6, and Spear said the school board will reevaluate their situation mid-year to determine if any further adjustments are needed.

Spear added, "This is going to be one of our most challenging years as we continue to have to do more with less. But the grim reality is that we anticipate the growth factor will not be included in next year's (2011-12) funding, and if the economy doesn't turn around, our budget problems could be even more serious."

The school system does have some good news on a number of fronts. "We were happy that our district performance scores were corrected a few months ago," Spear said. "We worked with the state Department of Education to recalculate and correct our numbers."

Back in the fall when school district rankings were announced, the Department of Education ranked the parish 13th, shocking and perplexing Spear and school board members. Each year, the state releases scores for all public school districts in

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Louisiana which are based upon a matrix of calculations and multipliers that weigh student scores on accountability tests, attendance and drop-outs.

School officials identified errors in the state's scoring process that incorrectly and adversely affected Livingston Parish's overall score and indicated the parish had a significant increase in dropouts. As it turned out, one of the parish's high schools that houses grades 10-12 on its campus was being calculated as having a 9-12 grade configuration.

"Of course there was no ninth grade class at that school, which caused the state's formula to calculate an entire ninth grade class as dropouts," Spear said. "Livingston Parish has always been fortunate to be a top 10 school system. Our teachers and administrators work hard to provide each child with a quality education and take pride in being one of the best. This acknowledged correction by the state means a lot to them and it says a lot about the effort they put forth each day," Spear said.

Three new schools – Juban Parc Elementary and Juban Parc Middle School, located off Juban Road, southeast of Denham Springs, and Southfork Elementary in Walker – are ready to accept students when the new school year opens August 6. A new Live Oak High School has been approved by the school board and is in the final planning stages. Spear anticipates that school will be ready for occupancy in about two years.

The Parent Portal program was introduced at Live Oak High School last fall and is now fully implemented in all schools. Spear said, "About 75-80 percent of all parents are using the portal which allows them to access their children's grades, attendance records and homework assignments.

The Family Resource Center at the Livingston Parish Literacy and Technology Center has also been "overwhelmingly successful," said Spear. "Families can check out education materials such as books, ACT testing software, videos, games and flashcards – all free of charge. Family workshops are also held from time to time."

Spear estimates the total enrollment at parish public schools for the 2010-11 school year will be around 24,500, saying, "We never know for sure what the pupil count will be, but we usually gain 300-500 students each year. We always plan for an increase so we'll be prepared. Despite our immense challenges, we're looking forward to another successful year."

Tap into education resources at Literacy Center



Family Resource Center

The 2010-11 school year will mark the second year of the Livingston Parish Public Schools' Family Resource Center at the Literacy and Technology Center near Walker.

The center was created to provide resources that will assist and support families with their children's education by providing free educational materials to parents of children in Livingston Parish Public Schools. This loaning library includes videos, books, games, flashcards, electronic games and resources, special needs information and ACT prep materials. The center also offers a variety of workshops throughout the school year.

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