

The Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms

Inaccurate Figures Thwart Data-Driven School Reform

Dr. Raynard Sanders

www.researchonreforms.org

With the rise in New Orleans' crime incidents involving teenagers, citizens look for answers. The issue of school dropouts and what are we doing to decrease their number becomes a pressing question. This legitimate question should not only be asked by citizens to local and state school officials, but it should be reported on with as much alarm as all the fan-fare the state does in announcing its annual report on standardized tests scores.

A few weeks ago in an article Dr. Barbara Ferguson raised that question by citing the number of students who failed the LEAP English Language Arts (ELA) tenth grade tests in 2008 and the number of re-testers who took the LEAP ELA tenth grade test over the next school year (Ferguson, 2009). Her analysis revealed that hundreds of students who failed the LEAP ELA test in May 2008 did not take the LEAP ELA test despite numerous opportunities to do so. Dr. Ferguson went on to discuss in her article how elusive it is to determine exactly how many students have dropped out given the reporting procedures of our high schools.

Shortly thereafter Recovery School District (RSD) Superintendent Vallas, in a broadly disseminated email, dismissed Dr. Ferguson's claims stating that she presented inaccurate data. Superintendent Vallas went on to present "correct numbers" regarding the students re-taking the LEAP ELA test from June 2008- May 2009 (Vallas, June 2009). It also should be noted that his data does indicate how many students were initial LEAP ELA test takers from May

2009. Despite this omission, his analysis, reinforced the point made by Dr. Ferguson showing hundreds of re-testers failing or not taking the test.



While Superintendent Vallas' reaffirmed Dr. Ferguson's findings of high numbers of students either failing or not re-taking the LEAP tests, he did not address her over-arching question, "How are we doing in decreasing our dropouts' rates?"

This comes on the heels of other recent incidents related to reporting accurate student data by RSD and the Louisiana Department of Education:

- RSD's claims that the 2009 LEAP scores were the largest gains since the inception of the LEAP tests in 1999. However a review of past years showed that *this year's gains were consistent with previous gains* recorded since 1999 (Ferguson, 2008 & Times Picayune May , 2009)
- A memo by the Louisiana Department of Education Strategic Research and Analysis Department issued on dropout rates of the 7th grade cohort stated that graduation rates have declined from 2002 - 2008, graduation rates for minority has declined and that "*Previous claims by the Department of Education that minorities have been benefiting from the Accountability system has been greatly exaggeratedthe graduation for black males is absolutely dismal*". This admission leads us to believe that state officials did not respond to a generation of 7th graders. In essence state officials have not responded to the "real" needs of a generation of 7th graders (Strategic and Analysis, Louisiana Department of Education, 2009).
- In a press release from the Louisiana Department of Education State Superintendent Paul Pastorek stated that it is important that they make decisions on accurate data. He went on to state that the figures that have been *disseminated on dropout's rates have been incorrect and that they are considering a policy change*. He went on to define graduation rates and dropout rates (Louisiana Department of Education Press Release, 2009).

Such exaggeration and misreporting of student data from our state and local education officials does not allow us to effectively craft solutions.

This seems to be the case in Superintendent Vallas' claims of increases in graduation rates at the RSD high schools for the 2008 - 2009 school year. In a radio interview he stated that during his tenure the graduation rates of RSD high have made some remarkable gains like never before (WBOK June, 2009). He repeated these claims in the response email regarding Dr. Ferguson's article (Vallas June, 2009). Below is the chart he used to document his claims.

Graduation Rates by Individual School - 2007 to 2009									
School	2006-2007			2007-2008			2008-2009		
	# eligible	# graduates	%	# eligible	# graduates	%	# eligible	# graduates	%
G.W. Carver*	*	*	*	24	20	83%	77	68	88%
Joseph S. Cl	66	26	39%	93	55	59%	113	90	80%
Walter L. Co*	*	*	*	53	31	58%	62	40	65%
Frederick De	172	49	28%	81	42	52%	123	97	79%
John McDor	306	105	34%	137	105	77%	116	104	90%
L.E. Rabouir	146	73	50%	144	89	62%	223	162	73%
Sarah T. Ree	170	85	50%	132	101	77%	189	138	73%
Algiers Tech*	*	*	*	14	11	79%	38	36	95%
O.P. Walker	221	206	93%	256	244	95%	218	204	94%
	1081	544	50%	934	698	75%	1159	939	81%
 RSD Operated					 RSD CHARTER				
<i>Note: This report only includes high schools with a senior class. An asterisk * denotes no senior class in this year.</i>									

The large graduation gains over a three year period claimed by Superintendent Vallas quite naturally raised eyebrows. It also should be noted that in a meeting in March 2007 with representatives of the Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms when questioned where the data was for RSD on the Louisiana Department of Education web site for the 2006-2007 school year, Louisiana Department of Education officials stated *that RSD did not submit any "data" during the 2006-2007 schools after numerous requests.*

What also caught everyone's attention in his chart was the number of students eligible for graduation at seven direct-run RSD high schools. Eligibility for graduation means that the students have the potential of meeting the LEAP and Carnegie unit graduation requirements.

A review of the enrollment counts as submitted by each RSD high school make the purported claims look suspect. Schools in Louisiana submit enrollment data in October and February each school year. Below is a chart listing enrollment numbers as submitted to the Louisiana State Department of Education by each school; also listed is the number of seniors eligible for graduation as listed in Vallas' chart.

RSD High School Enrollment and Graduate 2008-2009 Data

RSD High Schools	Enrollment	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade	# Eligible Graduates	Enroll - Oct	Enroll - Feb
Carver	<i>Oct</i>	148	141	119	80	77	534	437
	<i>Feb</i>	133	117	109	78			
Clark	<i>Oct</i>	156	151	124	107	113	589	497
	<i>Feb</i>	152	130	114	101			
Cohen	<i>Oct</i>	125	135	136	50	62	494	376
	<i>Feb</i>	113	108	98	57			
Douglas	<i>Oct</i>	86	103	155	79	123	481	403
	<i>Feb</i>	89	94	144	75			
McDonogh	<i>Oct</i>	144	103	175	119	116	567	466
	<i>Feb</i>	124	85	155	102			
Rabouin	<i>Oct</i>	3	122	187	213	223	525	525
	<i>Feb</i>	3	117	183	222			
Reed	<i>Oct</i>	176	191	161	176	189	748	657
	<i>Feb</i>	164	170	135	188			

Enrollment - the Oct. and Feb. numbers are taken for the MFP required counts submitted for each school by grade level. The highlighted numbers are the # of eligible seniors for graduation as reported by Vallas for 2009 on 6-5-09. Source: Louisiana Department of Education

A closer examination of Vallas' claims reveal that the number of students eligible for graduation in five out of seven RSD High Schools (highlighted in yellow) *exceeds* the number of seniors enrolled for the entire school term. At Douglas High School for instance, 46 more seniors were reported by Vallas as eligible for graduation than were enrolled there in February. Student enrollment usually changes slightly from October and February, due to student transfers,

expulsions.....etc. However seniors rarely change school during the second semester (January-May).

These comparisons make the claims by RSD questionable. Is the increase in eligible seniors as reported by Vallas from another student cohort (Classes of 2007, 2008)? If so these reports are in conflict with the state's definition of graduation rates. If they are students from a previous cohort, then the RSD gains that it is widely announcing is inaccurate.

This enrollment review more importantly brings us back to the dropout question. While the examination of LEAP re-testers is somewhat vague in that those figures include students from other cohorts, the student count from October to February in a given school year is “real”. The loss enrollment from October to February in our high schools alone this past school year was 577 students.

Data-driven decision making is a hallmark of school districts across the country. Given the recent admissions of data inaccuracy and exaggerations of minority achievement by the Louisiana State Department of Education and RSD, one can only conclude that the decisions we have made in New Orleans and Louisiana have ill-informed and have potentially adversely effects on thousands of our children.

Once again we call for transparent accountability data that is shared with local communities to craft educational improvement. When inaccurate figures are paraded to show unrealized success, the victims are the children who expect, deserve and have the right to a quality education.

Endnotes

Ferguson, Barbara, *Over 1500 Failing New Orleans Public High School Students not Retested*, Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms, 2009.

Vallas, Paul, email response document to Barbara Ferguson article, 2009.

Ferguson, Barbara, *State Take-Over Not Working for New Orleans High Schools*, 2008.

Carr, Sara, Simon, Darran, Thevenot, Brian, *Higher LEAP Scores Add Fuel to Debate over Charter Schools*, Times Picayune, May 2009.

Noll, George, et al, *Louisiana Seventh Grade Cohort Graduation Rate*, Strategic and Analysis, Louisiana Department of Education June,2009.

Louisiana Department of Education Press Release, *Department Sheds Light on Louisiana Dropout and Graduation Rate* ,June 2009.

Vallas, Paul, interview on WBOK Morning Show, June 2009.