



# **Executive Summary**

## **Ouachita Parish School System**

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## **Introduction**

Every school system has its own story to tell. The context in which teaching and learning takes place influences the processes and procedures by which the school system makes decisions around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The context also impacts the way a school system stays faithful to its vision. Many factors contribute to the overall narrative such as an identification of stakeholders, a description of stakeholder engagement, the trends and issues affecting the school system, and the kinds of programs and services that a school system implements to support student learning.

The purpose of the Executive Summary (ES) is to provide a school system with an opportunity to describe in narrative form the strengths and challenges it encounters. By doing so, the public and members of the community will have a more complete picture of how the school system perceives itself and the process of self-reflection for continuous improvement. This summary is structured for the school system to reflect on how it provides teaching and learning on a day to day basis.

## **Description of the School System**

**Describe the school system's size, community/communities, location, and changes it has experienced in the last three years. Include demographic information about the students, staff, and community at large. What unique features and challenges are associated with the community/communities the school system serves?**

### Description of the School System

The Ouachita Parish School System is located in the northeast corner of Louisiana. Northeast Louisiana is a 12-parish area bordered to the north by Arkansas and to the east by Mississippi. It is located in the Delta region of the state which is largely agricultural. The region supports three nearby universities--University of Louisiana Monroe, Louisiana Tech University, and Grambling State University--and a community college and technical college with satellite campuses in each of the principal cities. The Monroe metropolitan statistical area is the population and business center for the region and houses the largest retail shopping center as well as vast healthcare services with three medical centers, three specialty hospitals, a cancer treatment center, and a wide range of medical specialists. There are many new businesses under construction in the area including hotels and restaurants along with expansions of national corporations such as CenturyLink.

As the largest metropolitan area in northeast Louisiana, Ouachita Parish boasts an estimated population of 157,415 for 2015, according to U.S. Census Bureau, with an average household income of \$56,809. This depicts a steady population growth of 4.8% annually since 2010. Located at the crossroads of Interstate 20 and U.S. Highway 165 on the Ouachita River, the parish consists of ten major communities: Bawcomville, Brownsville, Calhoun, Claiborne, Lakeshore, Monroe\*, Richwood\*, Sterlington\*, Swartz, and West Monroe\* (\*designates incorporated cities.) Ouachita Parish Schools serve students in all of these communities with the exception of families within the city limits of Monroe who are served by the Monroe City School System.

Ouachita Parish Schools encompass grades PreK-12 with a student enrollment of more than 19,700 learners. Serving students are 2,875 employees. Of these, 1,628 are certified faculty and 1,247 are support staff. The district consists of 35 schools including 22 elementary, 8 middle, and 5 high schools. In addition, the district operates an alternative program with learning options for non-traditional students. Furthermore, twelve of our schools are designated as Title I Schools. Our student population is culturally diverse with 62% Caucasian, 34% African-American, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian and 1% other. The at-risk student population is steadily climbing as indicated by a 63% economically disadvantaged and 11% special education populace. The free/reduced lunch population in the district has declined from 56.82% to 54.56% over the past three years. The 2% drop mirrors an unprecedented fall in enrollment during the same timeframe. Historically, the district has enjoyed steady growth until October 2014. With current economic expansion and employment opportunities underway in Ouachita Parish, system leaders expect future enrollment to recover and continue its upward trend.

Since July, 2011 the School Board has issued \$82.8 million in new bonded debt for capital improvements. Major improvements included a new elementary school in Sterlington. With the move of elementary students to a newly constructed facility, a new middle school was created by moving existing students from the high school into the old elementary facility. Other major projects completed were:

- additional classrooms at Woodlawn Middle, Good Hope Middle, Robinson Elementary, and Calhoun Elementary
- STEM classrooms at West Monroe High and project-based learning labs at Sterlington High
- multipurpose buildings at Lakeshore Elementary and Ouachita Junior High
- new maintenance shop for transportation
- major renovations to Sterlington Middle gym
- athletic turf fields at 4 high schools
- vocational instruction building at Richwood High
- weight rooms at 6 middle schools
- new tennis courts at West Monroe and West Ouachita high schools
- renovated field house at Richwood High

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- outdoor walking tracks at 6 elementary schools
- safety improvements at all schools including enclosed outside classroom entryways, secure safety glass for school entrances, controlled remote access, and emergency call buttons

Capital projects currently underway are:

- construction of a new middle school in Swartz
- new competition gym at West Ouachita High
- major renovations to a gym and the stadium at West Monroe High
- new lecture hall at Ouachita High
- additional classrooms at Sterlington Elementary
- new multipurpose building and vocational building at Sterlington High

Growing resources is our most challenging area financially. Student growth is needed to increase state minimum foundation equalization funding, as the current structure of the Louisiana economy is not stable enough to provide annual inflationary increases in the state funding formula. Increased resources are demanded to meet the operational needs of opening a new middle school, maintain competitive salaries to attract the best qualified and experienced teachers, provide in-depth professional development to be fully empowered for teaching new and ever-changing curriculum standards, and to provide instructional tools and support for new vocational and technology-based curricula. While Ouachita Parish Schools enjoy tremendous ongoing community support, the tax structure to support capital improvements is not uniform throughout the district. With the parish being divided by a river that runs north and south, the system is divided into east and west taxing districts. The needs for the west district are funded with a 1% perpetual sales tax, while the east district is funded with limited property taxes that require voter approval. The restricted tax base east of the river which serves three distinct communities, coupled with the expected growth in one of those communities, Sterlington in the northeastern region, will lend many challenges in meeting future educational needs.

## **System's Purpose**

**Provide the school system's purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values, and/or beliefs. Describe how the school system embodies its purpose through its program offerings and expectations for students.**

### School System's Purpose

During 2015, Ouachita Parish School System has seen major changes within administration and supervision. Superintendent Coker began his position in July. While new to this office, Coker previously served as Assistant Superintendent and Personnel Director for eight years, following seventeen years as Principal and ten years as teacher/coach in one of the highest achieving schools in the district. Along with the Superintendent, our district welcomed a new Personnel Director, Director of High Schools, Director of Middle Schools, Director of Professional Accountability, Director of Child Welfare and Attendance, and Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability. Support leadership saw a significant change as well with three of the six leaders being new to their assignments. Of course with every new administration is expected employee turnover. One-third of Ouachita Parish Schools gained new Principals during this leadership transition. Additionally, the district welcomed one of its largest incoming group of new teachers at 150, about 10% of the teaching population in the district.

For the past thirteen years, Ouachita Parish Schools have operated under the following vision and mission:

### Vision

Ouachita Parish School System: Committed to Academic Excellence for ALL Students!

### Mission Statement

Through collaboration among all stakeholders, the Ouachita Parish School System will ensure that all students attain the knowledge and skills needed to be productive citizens.

These statements reflected a list of philosophical beliefs centered on educating every student for their best future. The current administration, working alongside stakeholders and supporters of the district, has set new goals and priorities to best prepare our students for the future. The number one priority for the district is SAFETY for students and employees. Working hand in hand with law enforcement and community agencies, our schools endeavor to maintain healthy environments on secure campuses where students can enjoy learning and achieve great successes. A second priority and academic goal for our district is to improve LITERACY across the curriculum. When all students read, comprehend, and respond on grade level, we have provided the foundation for them to succeed throughout their school years and into higher education and the workforce.

Administrators, teachers and staff in Ouachita Parish Schools are diligent in providing quality education. As a system, we are continually striving to examine all aspects of the educational community to make improvements within our schools where we see a need in order to meet the educational changes and challenges that are facing our students and educators. In respect to the new goals and priorities, district administrators and stakeholders came together to formulate a new vision and mission statement, as well as a shorter, albeit just as comprehensive, list of philosophical beliefs.

Vision: Building Bridges to the Future

Mission: As a community, Ouachita parish Schools will connect learning to 21st Century skills for college and career ready students who excel in a global society.

### Beliefs:

Ouachita Parish students will learn at high levels.

Parents, students, teachers, and community matter.

Safe schools are a top priority.

Bridges connect past and present learning to future dreams.

The district will introduce the new statements, along with a newly designed logo reflecting the bridges theme, to our community in February.

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Dr. Coker will address business and civic leaders, along with press and public in a "State of the Schools" report. The opportunity to speak is provided by a local chamber of commerce annually so that stakeholders may stay abreast of current events and aspects affecting the education of their future employees. System leaders never miss an opportunity to partner with surrounding entities on programs and projects to help our schools. Keeping the public informed of achievements and shortcomings, as well as wants and needs helps garner approaches for these partnerships.

## **Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement**

**Describe the school system's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school system is striving to achieve in the next three years.**

### Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement

One of the most notable achievements for Ouachita Parish School System happened on August 13, 2013 at 4:46 p.m. History was made when forty-seven years after the filing of a desegregation order, a federal judge ruled the district is in full compliance giving the system complete relief from federal control and supervision, better known as unitary status. The Supreme Court provided six criteria to evaluate whether a district functioned in a racially unified manner: physical facilities, extracurricular activities, faculty, administrative staff, transportation, and student assignment. "The court finds that the School Board has exhibited good faith in achievement and maintenance of such non-discriminatory programs and is prepared, willing and ready to move forward in a constitutionally consistent manner without direct judicial supervision in these areas," the ruling states. The court's decision reflects a concerted effort across the district to provide equal facilities and course offerings, staff diversity, and reasonable zoning. It was a monumental occasion in Ouachita Parish!

The district strives to maintain a high level of commitment to professional development that affects student performance by adding time, resources, and opportunities for district level and regional collaboration among teachers, curriculum leaders, and support staff. Professional development days were added throughout the school year, a teacher leader training and support initiative was implemented, and a team of coordinators who are experts in subject matter support school faculties. Ultimately, the leaders at various levels of the system work well together, although it has been noted that duties and responsibilities within the organizational structure of the system could be better defined. Many tools are utilized for educator growth. A few of these include:

- Principal Fellowship Grant: supports principals as instructional leaders through collaboration held across districts
- Believe and Prepare- Educator Preparation Grant for cohorts 2 & 3: focuses on the priority of Mentor Teacher Recruitment and Development, and district collaboration with universities to establish year-long residency for Teacher Interns

Ouachita Parish educators are consistently honored with local, regional, state, and national awards. The district is home to 2013 Louisiana Teacher of the Year, Dr. Amy Weems. Selected from 24 Regional Finalists, Weems was afforded opportunities to travel and learn with the nation's brightest educators. Additionally, Mrs. Melissa Williams was chosen as 2013 Louisiana Elementary Teacher of the Year. Both Weems and Williams were able to collaborate for affecting changes in the education of Louisiana students. Traditionally, Ouachita Parish has educators selected as Regional Finalists in Louisiana's Teacher of the Year Program each year, as well as winning top awards for many years.

Examples of notable faculty achievements:

- Mitzi Murray, West Monroe High: 2013 President's Award of Excellence for Outstanding Civics Teacher
- Bonnie Baxter, West Ouachita High: 2015 Louisiana Foreign Language Teacher's Association Teacher of the Year
- Donna Patten, West Monroe High: 2015 Louisiana State Finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching
- Darron Underwood, Ouachita Parish High: 2015 Louisiana State Finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching

Our schools are no strangers to garnering rewards. In March 2013, State Superintendent John White presented 19 Ouachita Parish Schools with monetary rewards for reaching Top Gains School designation. Top Gains Schools improve their School Performance Scores by a preset growth target, from 2-10 points. Each year, the district boasts schools earning the Top Gains designation; 2014-15 was no different. Three schools earned the title: Swayze Elementary, Richwood High, and Sterlington High. More highlights of spring 2015 performance include:

- District Performance Score of 94.9, letter grade of "B"
- 37% students scored Mastery or above on English Language Arts and Math Assessments combined (31% improvement)



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- 63.2% students who took advanced placement exams scored 3 or higher
- Average senior ACT score was 19.6
- 64% high school students taking End of Course exams scored Good or Excellent
- 20 of 35 schools (57.1%) achieved a School Performance grade of "A" or "B"
- Notable gains achieved by three of our most economically disadvantaged schools: Swayze Elementary improved to a "D", Lenwil Elementary improved to a "C", and Richwood High improved to a "C"
- Sterlington High School progressed to achieving an "A"

While the district has made great strides in performance as a whole, we are still only as strong as our weakest school. Within our 35 schools, 6 received a "C" grade, 6 received a "D" grade, and one school retained an "F." Intensive interventions and school improvement strategies are employed by school and district leaders to improve not only the school scores, but also bring the district score to "A."

Ouachita Parish students are recognized locally, regionally, statewide, and nationally. Students consistently garner kudos as Regional Student of the Year and compete for state titles. Each year the number of students accepted to state honor choirs grows. Our vocational and agricultural programs bring home first place titles in regional and state competitions. Students are honored in Beta competitions, national cheer programs, art contests, athletics, and more. Academically, our students are performing in top percentiles across the state on rigorous standardized tests. High school students are dually enrolled in college courses. In the past semester, students in our five high schools completed more than 984 dual enrollment courses with three local colleges ultimately saving parents close to one million dollars in tuition. Many of these students will enter college as sophomores.

## **Additional Information**

**Provide any additional information you would like to share with the public and community that were not prompted in the previous sections.**

### Additional Information

Teachers and students in Ouachita Parish enjoy state-of-the-art classrooms. Updated technology keeps today's digitally-minded youth engaged in learning. With financing provided by local taxes and bond proceeds, a major project began in 2012-13 to expand wireless technology and upgrade internet services in all schools and administrative facilities. In 2013-14 our IT department upgraded infrastructure across the district to eventually deliver internet speeds up to 10 gigabits. Wireless access points were installed bringing internet connectivity to every elementary and middle school classroom. In 2014-15 the installation of wireless access points in all high school classrooms was completed along with installation of a new point-to-point WAN network connection (10 gigabit.) This project involved burying almost 80 miles of fiber line across the district. The financing for the new service is made possible through ERATE discounted pricing.

The district could utilize further technology such as social networking to enhance learning for our students. However, the negative connotations of cyber-bullying have hindered interest in pursuing these avenues. More studies of successful implementation and safeguards are needed to fully embrace the ever-changing world of social networking as a tool for education.

Ouachita Parish School Board has consistently received awards from both the Association of School Business Official's International and the Government Finance Officers Association for excellence and achievement in financial reporting for the past 27 consecutive years. These awards certify our financial reporting substantially conforms to industry standards and additional criteria adopted by the sponsoring organizations.

The Ouachita Parish School Board maintains high bond ratings which are a measure of its credit worthiness to bond holders and investors. Its East and West school taxing districts maintain bond ratings of "AA-" by Standard & Poors Rating Services (S&P) for the issuance and sale of bonds, and the rating for the School District #1 taxing district was raised from "AA-" to "AA" in June 2014 with the issuance of \$15 million in Certificates of Indebtedness. All of these ratings are labeled as "stable" by S&P.

The district has encountered budget challenges with significant rising costs for employee retirement and group health insurance benefits in recent years. In 2012-13 the system reduced staff through attrition to reduce operating expenses. Current budget strategy is to maintain present level of operations. Administrative staff has worked to maintain the School Board's General Fund balance within 10-15% of its expenditures, which is the policy of the Board.

The school system has purchased 39 buses to upgrade its transportation fleet since July 2011 and is currently scheduled to purchase 11 more next year to maintain the 218 routes that are run every school day. One route averages 25.2 miles round trip. The average age of the fleet is 12.6 years which is ideal at 50% of the 25-year lifespan for a bus.

Ouachita Parish embraced the anti-bullying program Rachel's Challenge. The program stemmed from the life of Rachel Scott, the first victim to die in the Columbine High School shooting. As the first school system in Louisiana to implement the program, the system held a rally for all employees. During that event, employees made a commitment to foster a kind, compassionate environment for our students. Local businesses and churches attended the rally as well and pledged to financially support implementing the program.

Another collaboration to assist students and transform communities is Project HELP. The program brings together church, medical, and educational institutions to promote Healing, Education, Life Skills, and Parenting in communities surrounding schools with the highest at-risk population. Project HELP removes obstacles like transportation, costs, and the stigma of traditional counseling environments.

During the month of June, a learning program is held at one of our elementary schools to address the educational needs of the students in grades K-3. More than 100 students from one of the district's lowest socioeconomic communities spend their days in intensive instruction to help close achievement gaps within their population. This program, Riverbend Academic Camp, is unique in that it reflects collaborative efforts of community funding. It is sponsored by the City of West Monroe, Entergy, Senator Randy Ewing's Foundation, and United Way.

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Ouachita Parish selects the faculty and supervises the curriculum.

The school system works with United Way on the Read.Learn.Succeed. project. The education initiative focuses on 3rd grade students reading on grade level, with the ultimate goal of improving graduations rates. During the 2014-15 school year, 428 community volunteers read with 213 area students, and students received 5,200 free books to keep at home, helping to inspire a love of reading. Of the students who participated, 89% improved their reading skills, increasing their chances of graduating high school. In Ouachita Parish, the program impacts students in four elementary schools: Lenwil, Robinson, Shady Grove, and Swayze.

A 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant (21st CCLC) was awarded in 2013 and is in its last year of funding. The funding provides for creating community learning centers. The specific purpose of the program is to provide a wide range of academic and personal enrichment services to students and families of students who primarily attend schools that serve a high percentage of students from low-income families. The system has five 21st Century Community Learning Centers: Riser Elementary, Riser Middle, Richwood Middle, Shady Grove Elementary, and Swayze Elementary. Community Learning Centers are in partnership with the local non-profit organization Broaden Horizons. The grant award totaled over \$1 million for the three year period.