

August 25, 2015

Dear Editor:

A recent editorial in a locally distributed newspaper (“October ballot holds key races this fall for School Board seats,” August 22, 2015) notes that important decisions will be made in the October 24th election regarding the state’s school board, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). I agree with the editorial’s assessment of the importance of the BESE elections, but not its assertions regarding the educational progress of the past four years.

The editorial asserts that “test scores are up while dropout rates are down” but does not provide the source for this information. This assertion of academic progress is similar to assertions made by the leadership of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI)—a group whose leaders have pledged to spend a large amount of money supporting BESE candidates who will make similar claims in the fall election. But what is the source of these claims?

The claims originate from data provided by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), which is led by Superintendent of Education John White, who is appointed by BESE. While the LDOE should be a trustworthy, unbiased source of education data, the politics of the past four years have created a perception that the LDOE is misrepresenting information. A record amount of money was spent four years ago by LABI and other special interest groups to ensure that a BESE majority would be in place to hire White, the choice of Governor Bobby Jindal for the position.

Since White became Superintendent, the LDOE changed its website; it was once a functional government site that provided verifiable data to the public, but the data was removed and the site now primarily espouses a trite slogan – “LDOE.gov” became “LouisianaBelieves.com.”

Ironically, Louisiana cannot believe the claims that the 2012 reforms work, because they cannot be easily verified by independent sources. Numerous, lawful requests for public information from citizens have been ignored by the LDOE; some citizens had to take the LDOE to court to get data released. Credible researchers found that the LDOE had changed the curve on its standardized tests to make it appear that students were doing better on the tests and the LDOE has changed its metrics for calculating graduation rates and the number of students that go to college in order to improve these scores. When Louisiana’s citizens hear claims of academic progress over the past four years, they should be mindful of the questionable source of this information.

Local school districts would welcome true support and collaboration with business and industry to help address the ill effects of poverty on the students we serve, rather than business and industry trying to promote choice policies that redirect scarce resources to unproven education options.

I reiterate my support for responsible education reform initiatives that are research-based and accompanied by transparent data.

Sincerely,
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