

ONSITE



LaMoyne Williams, chief workforce development officer for Louisiana Technical College, talks about the automotive repair lab.

## Two birds, one stone

PILOT PROGRAM OFFERS HOPE TO OVERAGE STUDENTS, CHIPS AT WORKFORCE SHORTAGE >> by **MAGGIE HEYN RICHARDSON** photos by **TIM MUELLER**

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Ask people on the street to list the reasons why public education in Louisiana has failed and they will rattle off reasons: lack of parent involvement, teacher quality, below average pay, substandard classrooms, pervasive poverty.

But ask a middle school teacher, and while the list is also long and varied, one issue in particular stands out: overage students.

That fact emerged when 100 principals and 110 teachers from around Louisiana participated in Baton Rouge Area Foundation focus groups about what has stymied public education. These insiders painted the reality of some public school classrooms, where frustrated, disruptive overage students fall further and further behind.

The numbers are astounding. In 2007 in East Baton Rouge Parish alone, a whopping 7,497 students were overage by one year, while 2,052 were overage by two or more years. Many of these students will ultimately drop out, and with low-level literacy and scant job skills, their earning potential will be dismal.

After the focus groups, the Foundation and East Baton Rouge Parish School System officials discussed how they could zero in on the issue. With partners, including the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, the Louisiana Technical College and Career Builders, a pilot was launched to provide a learning avenue for overage students.

In January 2009, the “ConnectED” program selected 20 students from Capitol Middle, along with 20 students from Tara, Belaire, Glen Oaks and Lee high schools to attend courses three days a week at the Louisiana Technical College in fields that can translate to work.

The pilot curriculum focuses on construction, and it includes classes, labs and field trips to local facilities where students can see the application of job skills.

“We hope to raise these students’ awareness about high-demand careers, and to show them what it takes to live in the real world,” says Donnie Middleton, director of workforce development for Career Builders.

The ConnectED coursework supplements a student’s regular curriculum.

“In fact, the point is to demonstrate to students they have a reason to complete and excel at school,” says Tammy Brown, Louisiana Technical College chief development and public relations officer. “They’re not getting a certification, then immediately getting a job. We want them to understand the more they learn the better they will do.”

ConnectED addresses not just a dire need within the school system—how to productively advance overage students who are often uninterested, rowdy and significantly older than their peers—it also addresses Louisiana’s workforce shortage.

The silver lining to hurricanes Katrina and Rita was an infusion of federal money for massive reconstruction, which lured new companies and sparked thousands of jobs. But despite the availability, only 61.6% of the civilian population age 16 and older in Louisiana participates in the workforce, and a lack of qualified workers is one of the prevailing problems of current and potential employers, reported the Office of Governor Bobby Jindal last year.

ConnectED, says Middleton, could make a dent in the dearth of qualified workers. Organizers hope to expand the program significantly this fall.

One of ConnectED’s strengths is that it draws on the resources and existing programs of its vested partners. The school system provides transportation to students from their home campuses to LTC sites.

In addition, the curriculum itself, as well as equipment, already exists at LTC. Career Builders will provide practical job and life skills sessions. The Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition has stepped in to recruit and train mentors for each of the 20 high school students.

Literacy Coalition Executive Director Debbie O’Connor says her organization has recruited volunteers from complementary sectors, particularly manufacturing and construction, which rely heavily on technical colleges to produce qualified applicants.

“We want the students to feel like what they’re doing is relevant to their lives,” she says.

Thus, volunteers from ExxonMobil, Coca-Cola, Turner Industries and others have come forward to show students how sticking with it can lead to a good paying job with benefits.

While ConnectEd chips away at the workforce shortage and improves order within schools, at its core is the difference it makes to a group of students that most of society has given up on.

“They’re scared, and they’re worried about their future. To be 17 and in the eighth grade and know you need a job but can’t get one, that’s scary,” says Career Builders program organizer Juanita Coleman. “Our job is to show them they have hope.” •

