



The Ruston Daily Leader

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Schools adopt Ruston 21 goals

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Lincoln Parish School Board members made it official Tuesday night — they want education officials in Baton Rouge to recognize the school district as the No. 1 ranked school district in Louisiana by May 2017.

Members of the Ruston 21 education committee, composed of various members of the community, recommended in January that board members formally adopt that goal for the school district. Board members, however, had a few concerns Tuesday about how best to achieve that goal, especially after Ruston 21 committee members submitted their own suggestions. Board members can go along with some, but not all, of the Ruston 21 suggestions, said Board President Otha Anders.

“We embrace improvement. We do not want to appear to be negative because we are not. Some of these (suggestions) are doable, and others are cost prohibitive. Others may need modifying or adjusting,” Anders said.

Ruston 21 committee members suggested in a January report that the school district incorporate Head Start into the public school system. They also suggested that board members evaluate whether there is still a good reason for having a stand-alone sixth grade school (I.A. Lewis) and consider whether to merge it with the junior high or whether to incorporate it into the elementary schools. The school district should also consider creating a magnet high school, the report said.

“Are we going to fire the superintendent if we do not reach our goals? Are we going to recall board members? Are we going to fire principals and teachers?” Anders asked.

Board member Eddie Jones also wanted to know if the Ruston 21 committee suggestions on achieving the high academic goal is realistic, he said.

“I believe in the fundamental tenants of what they are trying to do, but I want to research if something of this ilk has been tried elsewhere, and, if so, what was the result? Are the time limits reasonable? What is our liability on this? I think these people (Ruston 21) have done an admirable job. We need to know what the school board and committee members are thinking, and we need to decide where we can meet at some point. We need to talk in terms of specificities rather than generalities.

“We could have the best intentions in the world, and they still would not fly the way they are supposed to. One could say it was a good idea, but there was poor execution. We could have the best ideas in the world, but some people (in the public) might have erroneous ideas in their minds (about what is going on) and that needs to be clarified. I am ready to jump on board, but these are factors to consider,” Jones said.

Board member George Mack, meanwhile, said he is bothered by the suggestion that the school district incorporate Head Start into the school system and that school officials evaluate the future of I.A. Lewis.

Ruston 21 committee members, though, only made those and other suggestions as just that — their own suggestions, said committee member Russell Woodard.

“We aren’t urging the adoption of policies or programs that involve any cost. We aren’t asking that any specific policies or programs be adopted. We are simply asking that this school board adopt the goal of being the top school district in seven years. That is all we are doing. Give the community a goal

that we can all work for together. We aren't trying to be a school board. It's your job to decide what programs and policies should be adopted," Woodard said.

Woodard suggested that school board members hold meetings and inform members of the public about the district's specific goals and then gauge feedback from people.

Lincoln Parish has plenty of room for improvement in terms of its academic performance when compared to other districts, according to state numbers.

The Lincoln Parish School System's District Performance Score in 2009 was 94, which gave the parish a ranking of around 26 out of 70 school districts in the state, said Donna Doss, school improvement and accountability coordinator.

The parish had a 71.4 percent graduation rate in 2009 — and 41 percent of the parishes in Louisiana rank higher than Lincoln, said school board member Ted McKinney, at a recent meeting of the school system's newly formed dropout committee.

There are a variety of other ways to improve the school district's academic performance, according to Ruston 21 members.

The final Ruston 21 report said that the school district should act more aggressively to get parents involved in the school system. Members of the community, meanwhile, should act more aggressively about supporting the tax and bond issues needed to properly fund a school system.

Other aspects of the parish's education system need more attention, such as early childhood education programs and remediation programs.

The Lincoln Parish School Board needs to pay greater attention to having an expanded school year and expanded school days, according to the committee's final report.

Board members also voted unanimously Tuesday to formally adopt two other Ruston 21 goals.

The first involves the school district ranking as one of the top 12 school districts by 2013.

The second involves the school district ranking in the top seven in the state by 2015.

Members of the public want the school district to succeed just as badly as members of the school board and Ruston 21, Woodard said.

"Let's have (specific) numbers that we can measure ourselves by rather than saying we are just getting better or we did good last year. If the public doesn't buy in (to what is going on) then that is the public's problem. We think that the public can buy in, and this is something that will help us all succeed together," Woodard said.

Ruston Mayor Dan Hollingsworth attended Tuesday night's meeting, and he thanked board members personally for their unanimous vote.

"I am elated that you have adopted this unanimously. It is a watershed event," Hollingsworth said.

"We live in a community that has great expectations. None of this was ever intended to be critical of the school board. This was supposed to be a way to move us to a better place. Our potential is unlimited with two universities here."

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