

# Story of Success

ASCENSION PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS,  
DONALDSONVILLE, LOUISIANA

## District Context

**Ascension Public Schools has worked to improve student academic outcomes through a variety of strategies over the last 15 years, with an intensive focus on building the skills of classroom teachers who serve students with the greatest barriers to learning.**

While high-need students have experienced the most accelerated growth, results for all students in the district have improved dramatically. Ascension Public Schools is headquartered in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, approximately 60 miles northwest of New Orleans. The district spans 300 square miles and serves 23,400 students in 29 schools. Fifty-six percent of Ascension students are economically disadvantaged, and 45% are minority students. High-need students are heavily concentrated in a small number of schools that were historically rated as D or F schools.

In the 2006-07 school year, under the leadership of Superintendent Patrice Pujol (now Senior Executive-in-Residence at NIET), district leaders first partnered with NIET to support two high-need schools that had been identified by the state as needing improvement. The approach focused on providing intensive support for classroom instruction through TAP's core strategy of training teacher leaders and school administrators to provide instructional support for classroom teachers through school-based professional learning and coaching.

*Continued Next Page*



*G.W. Carver Primary School; Ascension Public Schools;  
Gonzales, Louisiana*



EXCELLENCE



*Duplessis Primary School; Ascension Public Schools;  
Gonzales, Louisiana*

# Key Lessons

**Success in the initial two schools led district leaders to expand the TAP System to 14 of Ascension's highest-need schools over the next several years. At the same time, they began scaling some of the best practices of TAP across all 28 schools in the district. Here are key lessons learned:**

## DEVELOP A SHARED VISION OF GREAT CLASSROOM TEACHING:

The district's highest-need schools struggled to provide high-quality rigorous instruction, particularly since students were often several grade levels behind. There was not a common understanding of what quality instruction should look and sound like. The district adopted NIET's research-based description of strong teaching practices, creating a common language and expectations for instruction. The NIET Teaching Standards Rubric formed the foundation from which schools raised expectations for educators and allowed individual teachers to take greater ownership of their classroom practice and skill development. Use of clear and detailed descriptions of teaching practices also enabled the district to measure and support improvements. This success led to Ascension implementing the rubric across the entire district.

## RECRUIT AND RETAIN HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHERS IN HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS:

A key barrier facing the highest-need schools was recruiting and retaining effective educators. With the increased investment in teacher leadership and skill development, teachers in the targeted high-need schools began to make significant and sustained improvements in student learning growth. This attracted the attention of colleagues across the district and increased the number of educators interested in working in these schools. In addition, district leaders made a bold decision: the path

for those who aspired to be in leadership would be to work and excel in one of the targeted schools. By shifting the path to promotion for teachers to demonstrating success working in a high-need school, the district was able to draw talent to its highest-need schools. This also strengthened teacher and school leader knowledge of, and identification with, all students in the district.

## DEVELOP EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATORS:

Teacher leaders based in each school provided everyday support for classroom teachers in addition to leading weekly meetings of professional learning communities. This continuous support and coaching strengthened the level of instruction across the building. Further, teacher leaders were encouraged to build their own leadership skills through training, on-the-job experience, and participation on the school leadership team. Principals increased their own knowledge and skill in leading instructional improvement and gained expertise in guiding their leadership teams to work collaboratively toward shared goals.

## ALIGN DISTRICT AND SCHOOL-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:

At the district level, central office staff played a key role in designing, supporting, and prioritizing school-based professional learning. The direct involvement of district staff helped to create coherence between district-level initiatives and the work of school leadership teams. For example, working with school leadership teams to roll out new curriculum or other reforms in coordination and with the involvement of teacher leaders in each school assured that every teacher had the same understanding of the change and that deep implementation happened in every classroom. *Continued Next Page*



*Duplessis Primary School; Ascension Public Schools; Gonzales, Louisiana*

## What's Next?

**Ascension is sustaining momentum and making ongoing progress. Under the leadership of Superintendent David Alexander, Ascension continues to see growth and progress in its highest-need schools.**

In 2019, Ascension was ranked No. 4 in the state on the district performance scores, continuing to earn an “A” from the Louisiana Department of Education. Investments in effective teachers and ongoing learning opportunities have created a structure of support that is an engine for continuous improvement. Ascension Public Schools is continuing to strengthen school culture and draw talent to its highest-need schools. These successful innovations continue to resonate in schools across the district, raising achievement levels for all students. ●