

ONE DISTRICT, ONE VISION

Putting teacher talent first, Dr. Cade Brumley led a team of DeSoto Parish educators and their students to achieve their first-ever “A” rating, growing from 45th to 14th best-performing district in Louisiana.

Walk inside any school in DeSoto Parish, located just south of Shreveport, Louisiana, and you’ll feel a sense of urgency in the air as teachers work together to meet the needs of every student. The school’s instructional framework is dedicated to the task. At the helm is the principal, assisted by master and mentor teachers, who share in the duties of driving instruction.

Teaching behind a closed door may be the norm elsewhere, but here in DeSoto Parish, teachers exchange best practices through weekly professional development led by master and mentor teachers.

Forget the brief classroom walk-throughs that tend to limit principals in providing meaningful feedback to teachers for sharpening their craft. Teachers use a research-based rubric as the bedrock of their instruction, carefully crafted to provide a powerful tool to harness strengths, identify weaknesses and help all educators work towards continuous improvement. Teachers are observed on the rubric by the school’s leadership team of administrators, mentor and master teachers, receiving regular follow-up year-round.

And through this robust system of advancing educator effectiveness, teachers have the opportunity to receive performance-based compensation determined by their growth in the classroom and the progress of their students.

As the schools implement these supports—based on a national model known as TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement—they remain focused on a singular mission. It’s a credo that

their superintendent, Dr. Cade Brumley, makes sure to instill in every employee of the district:

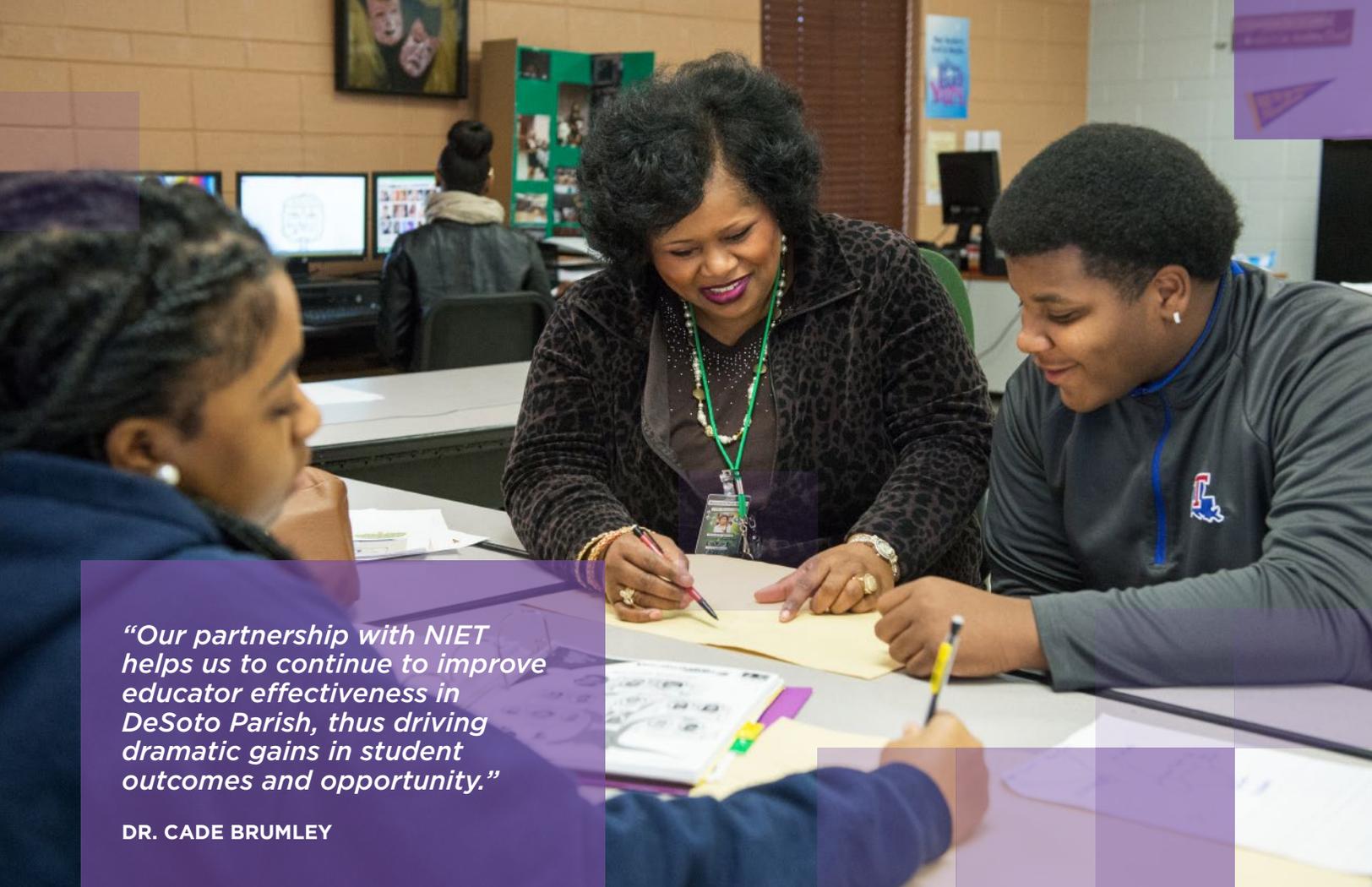
“DeSoto serves to care for our students, ensure their learning, and celebrate their graduation as citizens prepared to transform their dreams into realities.”

The vision is embedded in the work of every staff member in the school buildings to district administrators and Brumley himself.

“Every decision we make advances our district toward this mission,” he explains. But he quickly notes that he cannot do this work alone. “I’m flanked by an amazing leadership team and a talented instructional staff.”

Their effectiveness and cohesion are reflected in their historic growth in Louisiana, spanning virtually every area while serving a student body of whom 67 percent are economically disadvantaged:

- “A” State Rating
- Ranked 14th out of over 70 districts in academic performance, up from 45th in 2010. Every school improved its performance score.
- 96 percent graduation rate, up 20 points since 2013
- Largest ACT growth in Louisiana
- Identification of gifted and talented students more than doubled
- Top 10 district in Louisiana for improving outcomes for special education students
- Twice named to the National Advanced Placement (AP) Honor Roll



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Building a competent team to achieve these remarkable results did not happen by accident. At the district level, Brumley puts a significant investment in the hiring process, centralizing applications and placing “great emphasis on recruiting a talented pool of applicants,” he notes.

“Our human resources department is constantly looking at alternative ways to employ the best people,” Brumley says. “Those most qualified are passionate, curious and intelligent, with an eye on improving student outcomes as an ultimate goal.”

After they are selected by a school-based hiring team, teachers go through an “onboarding” process, in which they receive a targeted level of support during their first year in the district. From day one, they are briefed on the district’s key principles, vision and expectations. These elements are reinforced at the district office and at the schools where they are assigned throughout the duration of their tenure. Through the instructional benefits offered via the TAP System, coupled by a district effort to develop competitive compensation packages and unify the schools under a strong vision, Brumley aims to retain effective teachers over the long haul.

The system of support embedded at the district and school levels motivates talented educators to stay. It helps to alleviate the typical challenges such as changes in leadership, disjointed goals, revolving “education fads” and decreased budgets. Brumley explains that other district leaders may take a budget, then decide how to spend it. That, he says, is a mistake. It should be the other way around: “Because we prioritize our mission, we fund it.”

Brumley readily admits that this process has not been without difficulties; he has faced tough decisions. Over the last few years, his revenue decreased by 40 percent due to the area’s economic decline, complicating negotiations. Calling himself “logical and practical,” Brumley never wavered from his target of “putting talent in front of our children.”

There’s no room for complacency. Brumley sees these results not as a destination, but as an opportunity.

“We’re not done yet,” he says. “Every moment must matter for our students.”



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In this spirit, Brumley is relentless in pursuing innovative avenues that advance his vision. Some of those include robust outside partnerships, such as the continuation of work with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET)—the organization that manages and supports the TAP System. The partnership has benefitted from grants from the Teacher Incentive Fund and School Improvement Grant programs of the U.S. Department of Education, as well as state and local funding for educational excellence.

“Our partnership with NIET helps us to continue to improve educator effectiveness in DeSoto Parish, thus driving dramatic gains in student outcomes and opportunity,” Brumley says. The district has been recognized nationally by NIET for its success in increasing the effectiveness of classroom instruction and building district and school systems to support these improvements.

In addition, DeSoto Parish Schools recently partnered with Northwestern State University in Louisiana— Brumley’s alma mater—to help prepare teacher candidates for the classroom. At both middle and high schools, the district joins the

university in training candidates over the summer for a yearlong residency placement at those schools. At year’s end, the candidates are certified by the university and have the opportunity to be hired by the district for the following year. Brumley sees this partnership as a proactive way to “recruit our own students,” grow talent from within, and meet the demands of high-quality instruction.

This 360-approach to learning is not surprising coming from Brumley, who is a lifelong educator and learner himself. At six years old, in front of his first-grade classroom, he announced his aspirations to become an educator. Since that time, he has worked as a teacher and principal, in the Caddo and Sabine parishes respectively, before serving in DeSoto Parish in 2010 as assistant superintendent. In 2012, he was elevated to the top role.

“I am completely humbled to serve in this job and do this work that I do each and every day for students and DeSoto Parish as a whole,” Brumley says. “I don’t take this job lightly and don’t disconnect from the work we get to do and the opportunities we get to expand on our mission.”