

October 5, 2017

Dear Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education:

Please allow this letter to serve as a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) Regulation Waiver Request from the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. As Superintendent of Schools of the Local Education Agency (LEA), I am requesting a waiver of Bulletin 111 – *The Louisiana School, District and State Accountability System, Section §4503, One Year Waiver for “Severe Impact” Schools and Districts*. According to this policy, “Schools that meet either of two conditions associated with disasters shall be labeled “severe impact” schools and shall receive a one year waiver of accountability decisions based on the schools’ school performance scores. The one year waiver is limited to the year in which the disaster occurred.” One of the conditions is “the school was closed, due to a disaster, for 18 or more consecutive school days during a given academic year”. While the East Baton Rouge Parish School System reopened on the seventeenth day, this decision prioritized the needs of students and families over accountability consequences. I am requesting that BESE use its authority to make a two day exception to the eighteen day (18) criteria of its own written policy given the abundance of evidence that the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and all of its schools suffered severe impact due to the natural disaster that occurred in August 2016. This waiver request applies to the East Baton Rouge Parish School District and all of its individual schools.

The East Baton Rouge Parish School System and all of its schools were closed from Friday, August 12, 2016 through Monday, September 5, 2017. During this time, the district remained closed for sixteen consecutive instructional days. During the months that followed, BESE granted policy waivers to the district to support the following student needs during the course of the 2016-2017 academic school year: student records (Bulletin 741. §701 & §703), compulsory attendance (Bulletin 741. §1103), Carnegie credit for high school students (Bulletin 741. §2314), and regulations for the implementation of Children with Exceptionalities Act (Bulletin 1706. §1904) to allow for the district to continue to provide services to non-identified high potential and gifted students within Scholastic Academy and Great Scholars programs.

While our district infrastructure could have benefited from two additional school closure days to better ready itself, our school board and staff felt it imperative to return students to school as soon as possible to meet and respond to the needs of students, parents, employees and the community. First and foremost, our students needed a sense of normalcy and structure to provide the wrap around services required after experiencing such trauma. Our ICARE Department and crisis response teams are exemplary and have often served as a model in support of other districts across the state. They provided guidance to our staff as student needs were our first priority. Secondly, our district participates in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program that provides all students with two free meals plus an after school snack on a daily basis. Our eighty-four percent (84%) economically disadvantaged population, needed our district to reopen so they could receive the child nutrition services to which they are entitled and upon which they rely. Parents of over 40,000 students needed our schools to open, so that they could return to work

without worry for child care. As one of the largest employers in our parish, our employees needed our schools to reopen so that they could return to work and a sense of normalcy as many of them were rebuilding their own flooded homes.

While the district reopened on September 6, 2016 in response to the needs of students, there were several immediate challenges during the month of September 2016 that significantly disrupted teaching and learning while preventing normal operations:

- Fifteen (15) physical plants encompassing ninety one (91) buildings owned by the East Baton Rouge Parish School System suffered severe flood damage.
- Twelve (12) schools were relocated due to flooding. Spaces had to be outfitted with furniture, materials and supplies required to house students and staff. This work continued during the month of September 2016. This work continues today; three (3) schools have yet to return to their permanent buildings.
- An additional eight (8) schools were impacted by sharing space with relocated flood sites. Materials and supplies typically dedicated to students on those sites had to be shared for months.
- Schools not directly impacted as flood or relocation sites experienced an indirect impact through students and staff traumatized by home flooding. Because the district offers a multitude of choices in academic programming (magnet, gifted, charter and other specialized programs), a significant number of schools enroll students from across the district. District resources were deployed to meet the needs of those identified as necessitating assistance.
- Facility and technology infrastructure had to be addressed to outfit previously closed swing spaces in the midst of flood our response in order to house displaced students and staff. This work continued during the month of September 2016.
- Seven (7) administrative sites were closed due to flooding including those that house the district's transportation, exceptional student services, professional development, Pre K, and curriculum and instruction departments. Many of them remained displaced through the entire year working in makeshift spaces while maintaining student support services. Four (4) departments remain displaced at the start of the current school year.
- The district lost 114 (114) busses in the flood; the reopening of school and reestablishment of new routes during the month of September, 2016 was hindered due to a lack of operable busses. Over the course of the past year, the district has purchased sixty-eight (68) replacement busses. This remains a challenge as the district fleet is still forty-six (46) busses short of its pre-flood numbers.
- While other sites remained open, some suffered moisture intrusion in isolated areas and several lost phone and internet connectivity. Some sites reopened with limited connectivity and these needs had to be addressed during the month of September, 2016.
- In order to best meet the needs of families, displaced students were allowed to apply for new transportation routes to continue to attend their home schools. Over 2,000 families registered online with our transportation department to receive updated routes. This put a stress on an already limited bus fleet for the remainder of the school year.
- Several school cafeterias had to undergo immediate inspections to be able to provide meal service to students. At least three child nutrition delivery vehicles sustained flood

damage. These vehicles are used to deliver meals to satellite locations which was much needed after flood relocations.

- Not counting supplemental instructional materials, a combined total of 46,100 library and textbooks were damaged and lost due to flooding. Replacements were not immediate in most cases and work continued for several weeks and months to provide needed instructional materials.
- Hundreds of chrome books, desktop computers and other technology related items had to be replaced and rebuilt in order to support students for state mandated assessments. This work continued into the second semester of the school year.

As the district still continues its flood response and restoration efforts a year later, additional data points demonstrate the severe impact the August 2016 flood had on teaching and learning in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and all of its schools. Additional points to consider are as follows:

- 1,178 employees self-reported during the month of August 2016 that they were displaced out of their homes due to flooding.
- There was a 2,606 day increase in reported employee absences during the 2016-2017 school year as compared to the same data from the previous school year.
- There was a 1,445 day increase in the number of student absences reported during the months of September and October 2016 as compared to the data reports from the same months in the previous school year.
- There was a 510 day increase in the number of students who were reported tardy to school during the months of September and October 2016 as compared to the same months in the previous school year.
- To date, the school system has utilized \$42 million dollars from the general fund in flood recovery efforts. These are funds that would have otherwise been spent in support of increased student achievement efforts. Insurance reimbursements replace \$10 million of these expenditures. To date FEMA has approved reimbursement for an additional \$10 million dollars towards an overall projected \$90 million dollar flood damage to district facilities.
- According to an August 5, 2017 report by *The Advocate*, an estimated 50,000 – 75,000 structures in the greater Baton Rouge area flooded. It stands to reason that many of these were the homes of staff employed by and students enrolled in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System.

In light of the data and evidence cited above, the August 2016 flood had a severe impact on teaching and learning within the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. The impact of the floods served as a traumatic experience for the entire Baton Rouge community including students and staff. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “a traumatic event can seriously interrupt the school routine and the process of teaching and learning. There are usually high levels of emotional upset, potential for disruptive behavior, or loss of student attendance unless efforts are made to reach out to students and staff with additional information and services. Students traumatized by exposure have been shown to have lower grade point averages, more negative remarks in their cumulative records, and more reported absences from school than other students. They may have increased difficulties concentrating and learning at school and may engage in unusually reckless and aggressive behavior.” District data collected over the past

twelve months shows the above to be true as the impact of the August 2016 flood lingers well beyond closure days and into the current school year.

I wish to thank the staff of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) for their ongoing technical assistance and support during our flood recovery process. In the early days of school closure, Melissa Stilley and our network team reached out to support our district. Through the months of September and October, Erin Bendily and staff assisted our team with preparing and presenting the waivers referenced earlier. Last November and for weeks following, Jessica Baghian and her staff met at my request to discuss the possibility of paper based testing due to technology infrastructure concerns. When we were told paper based testing in all grades was not a viable option, LDE accountability and technology staff worked collaboratively with members of our team to provide support in testing preparations. At that time, I committed to having our students take state LEAP 2025 and End of Courses tests while putting "our best foot forward". The district's good faith efforts prioritized students and the daily demands of flood recovery over waiver request protocols and timelines. Over the past weeks, we have analyzed and discussed assessment results to best support our district. In doing so, the severe impact of the natural disaster became more and more evident especially among our district's large economically disadvantaged subgroup. Our team has provided LDE staff with a list of schools with notations detailing our concerns of direct and indirect flood impact on statewide assessment results. LDE staff has welcomed this conversation and we appreciate their attention to our concerns. As a result of these conversations, I feel it is important to move forward with this waiver request.

As the Superintendent of Schools of the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, I respectfully request that BESE exercise its authority to grant a waiver to the LEA and all of its schools as a "severe impact" district regardless of the number of days closed in response to the disaster. While the district was closed for sixteen consecutive days following the natural disaster, the severe impact lingered for the days, weeks and months to follow. I fully understand that the current severe impact policy requires eighteen consecutive days of school closure; however, my decision to reopen our school district on the seventeenth day was made based on human need, not accountability policy. After a year of significant growth during the 2015 testing cycle, the trauma of the physical, mental and social impact of the flood on our students is evident. Increased absences, disruptions to traditional test preparations due delays associated with replacing instructional materials, loss of bandwidth and technology infrastructure, loss of computer devices, and unfamiliar home and testing environments have caused a dramatic decrease in test scores this past spring. It is obvious that the August 2016 flood severely impacted our student's ability to perform at the levels they were accustomed to on this year's test. With this waiver, the district requests that all schools in the LEA "receive a one year 'disaster' waiver [and] shall not have school performance scores, growth labels, or letter grades published for the year of the waiver. Assessment results will be provided to the district for planning purposes." The district is prepared to continue its improvement and recovery efforts and re-enter the accountability system at its current status for the 2017-2018 school year.

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Please contact me if additional information is required. I would be happy to meet with BESE or LDE staff to discuss this request in further detail. On behalf of the stakeholders of the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, I thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Warren Drake". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Warren Drake

Superintendent of Schools

WD:jem