

Initiatives in Education, Economic Development Present Challenges, Yield Big Rewards

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The Rapides Foundation is a health care legacy dating back to 1994. The foundation's grantmaking focus has always addressed traditional health care and health promotion priorities. We have funded medical training and programs that help people get access to medication and launched programs that helped communities fund walking trails and playgrounds. Our Get Healthy Cenla Initiative focuses on getting residents to quit tobacco, exercise more, and make healthy food choices.

This type of grantmaking falls under our Healthy People priority area. The foundation has two other priority areas – Education and Healthy Communities – that fall outside the traditional realm of health care grantmaking, yet drive our overall mission of improving the health status of Central Louisiana. These two areas include initiatives in the areas of education and economic and community development.

WHY FOCUS ON EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

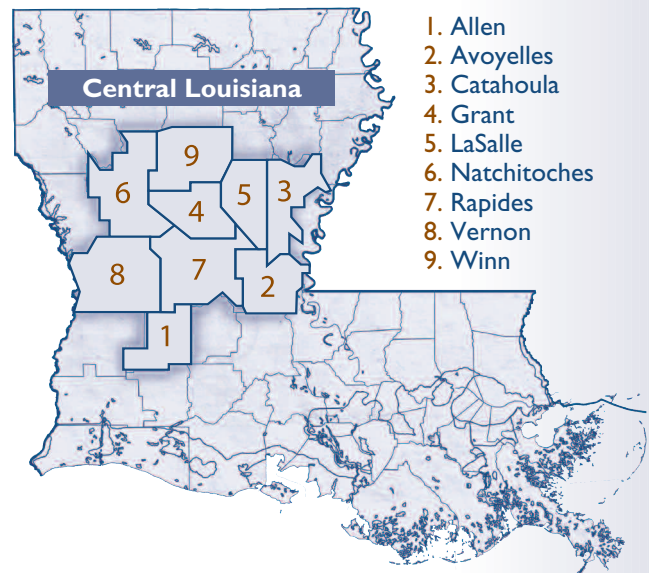
Research shows a strong correlation between a vibrant economy and the health of a community's population. According to Healthy People 2010, inequalities in income and education underlie many health disparities in the United States. Populations with the highest poverty rates and lowest education levels suffer the worst health problems.

People with higher incomes have better access to medical care. They can afford better housing, live in safer neighborhoods, and have the means to engage in healthy behaviors. Community members who achieve these goals are, on average, in much better health than those unable to do so.

Higher levels of education translate into more years of life. Healthy People 2010 tells us that for women, the amount of education achieved is a key determinant of the survival of their children. The infant mortality rate is almost double for infants of mothers with less than 12 years of education compared with those with an educational level of 13 or more years. Higher education levels increase the likelihood that the parent will obtain and understand health-related information so needed to protect her children.

For these reasons, our board saw the importance of

THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION SERVICE AREA



initiatives and grants that strive to ultimately raise the education and income levels in Central Louisiana communities.

OUR WORK IN EDUCATION

The foundation devotes 25 percent of our spending to our education initiative, which seeks to make schools more effective through improved teaching and learning for improved student performance. We engage national experts to guide our work in this challenging field.

Our first education efforts were school-level grants. What resulted were improvements in teacher knowledge, confidence, and student engagement. We saw the need to deal more consistently and equitably with all children, not just those in a grant-receiving school. Superintendents and school boards saw the value of the school grants and became committed partners when we expanded our efforts to the district level with the Systemic Initiative in Education (SIE).

Under the SIE, we provide professional and leadership development to superintendents, principals, and teachers in nine parishes. According to the 2004 report *How Leadership*

Influences Student Learning by the University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school. As a result, principals and teachers will become instructional leaders; teachers will utilize new and better instructional strategies; and, ultimately, student achievement will improve.

Leadership development was initially embedded in the overall improvement plan of the districts funded by their respective SIE grants from the foundation. However, for the past three years, we have funded and facilitated leadership development activities at the Central Louisiana level. We found that leadership development required a defined and concerted effort to begin the change process, and in hindsight we should have begun the SIE with these leadership institutes.

We also found that the practices teachers learned from SIE professional development efforts have been slow to find their way into the classroom. As we know from health promotion, behavior change is hard – and for a lot of reasons. Our response is to support the district to develop and implement coaching/mentoring efforts to gain increased student learning achieved from even better teaching.

SIE originally focused on literacy and mathematics. Just this year the foundation shifted that focus to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and Career and Technical Education.

LESSONS LEARNED IN EDUCATION

What we learned along the way is that we should have started some of our projects earlier in the process. Lessons include:

- awarding grants at the district level, instead of school level;
- instituting leadership academies at the beginning to establish a body of knowledge;
- encouraging collaboration between the nine school districts (collaboration allows the districts to share their experiences and best practices); and
- sending coaches and mentors to the schools to support teaching changes and drive the implementation of best practices.

OUR WORK IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The foundation dedicates 25 percent of funding to this priority area, which is designed to improve the economic environment in Central Louisiana. To help guide our work, we engage Regional Technology Strategies, a North Carolina-based nonprofit with expertise in economic development.

In 2001 we began awarding grant dollars to nonprofit alliances of Central Louisiana companies and education institutions that worked together to deliver employee training programs or build technical knowledge within the participating firms. The Workforce Development Initiative showed great benefit in preserving and advancing workers' careers while making the companies more efficient and viable. Translation of employer training needs into curricula and

classes presented a gap where progress was made through the initiative.

In April 2003 we were approached by community leaders who felt there was a need to enhance economic development in the region. That led to the eventual formation of Cenla Advantage Partnership (CAP), a private, regional nonprofit economic development organization. The foundation matched funds for each private contribution made to CAP. Some 25 business leaders accepted our challenge and signed up.

The foundation also funds through CAP the Entrepreneurial League System®, a national program that raises the level of a community's entrepreneurs by recruiting coaches to work closely with them. We later identified individuals who were not ready for the full program but wanted to learn how to start a business. As a result, CAP began hosting the Entrepreneurship 101 Class.

CHALLENGES IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Central Louisiana presents itself with a set of challenges when it comes to workforce and economic development. As a foundation, we feel it is important not only to recognize these weaknesses, but in some instances to open community discussions in order to make change.

1. Central Louisiana lacks a comprehensive technical college and community college system, even though 65 percent of our jobs require less than a four-year degree but more than a high school diploma. Our new Beyond High School project is studying this area.
2. There is a lack of effective and actionable communication between employers and the education community in our region. Our role as a foundation is to serve as an honest broker to try to bridge this gap.
3. There exists a fragmented support system for entrepreneurs and business startups. Our role here is to work with established providers to help fill in the continuum of support systems for our job creators. We are addressing this problem through our work with the Entrepreneurial League System®.

OUR COMMITMENT

Our trustees and staff have committed to deploying our resources to impact key factors that drive health status. We have bound ourselves to intended impacts against which we will measure progress over extended but specific periods of time. It is at the same time complex and simplistic, but we are ambitious in our aims to be good stewards of this health legacy. Discipline to purpose, continual reflection, and adjustment will be required to meet our goals.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.