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## CASE STUDY

# Raising Achievement of Students Behind Grade Level at Jefferson Parish Schools (LA)

*by Robbie Havdala and Brianne Rok*

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*Organizational Shifts and Changes to Service Delivery Drive Holistic Change*

Robbie Havdala and Brianne Rok

**T**he 2005 story of Hurricane Katrina is well-known: widespread destruction, homes flooded, and communities ravaged across New Orleans. While media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath largely focused on New Orleans and Orleans Parish School District, Jefferson Parish Schools, which surrounds New Orleans and is the largest district in the state, also experienced severe devastation.

Much like the experience of students in Orleans Parish School District, the 51,000 students in Jefferson Parish Schools (JP Schools) faced obstacle after obstacle in the wake of Katrina. Eighty-two percent of the district's students are economically disadvantaged, and while the district continues to have some of the top-performing test-in academies in the state, the majority of students in the parish attend a school that is rated C or below on the state's scale. Punctuating this bifurcation is the geographic divide of the Mississippi River, which separates the East Bank from the West Bank.



Dr. Cade Brumley, Superintendent

In March 2018, JP Schools' School Board hired Dr. Cade Brumley as the new superintendent with high hopes. Although Dr. Brumley came from a smaller district, DeSoto Parish in northwest Louisiana, he had garnered a reputation as a talented change agent and leader. During his tenure in DeSoto, Dr. Brumley led the parish

## FAST FACTS

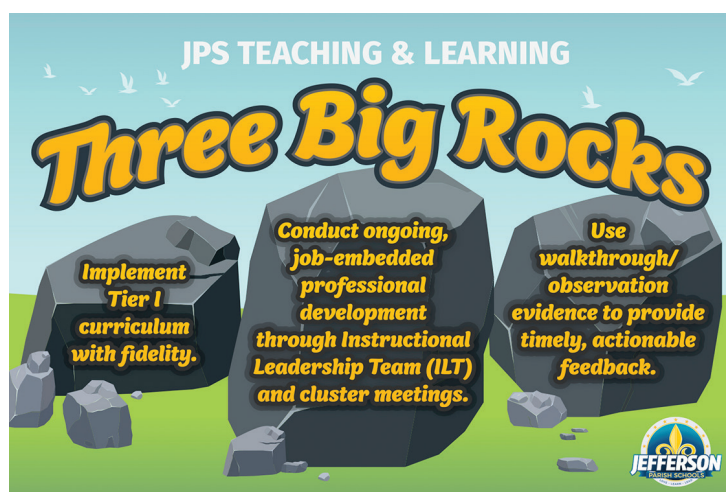


JEFFERSON PARISH  
SCHOOLS (LA)

### 51,000 students

- **40%** African American
- **27%** Hispanic
- **27%** White
- **5%** Asian
- **1%** Other
- **82%** economically disadvantaged
- **18%** exceptionalities/special education
- **14%** limited English proficiency

- Largest public school system in Louisiana
- Most diverse district in the state



Source: Jefferson Parish Schools.

into the state's top 10 for student academic achievement from its position of 49th in the state, and improved the district's graduation rate by 20 percentage points to an impressive 96%. He accomplished this despite a 40% decline in revenue over five years.

Brumley was clear-eyed about the challenges he would face at JP Schools, a district rich in history and belief in tradition, but he was determined to make a difference as he had done in DeSoto Parish. Knowing that he couldn't lead Jefferson Parish's turnaround by himself, he brought in two new leaders to support the district's core team — Dr. James Gray was brought in as Chief of Schools and Ms. Gabrielle Misfeldt as Chief Strategy Officer. Quickly, the Teaching and Learning team grounded their instructional strategy in what they called the Three Big Rocks, core values centered around high-quality Tier 1 curriculum and instruction, job-embedded professional development through instructional leadership team and cluster meetings, and feedback to teachers via walkthroughs (*Exhibit 1*). By February 2019, Brumley and his leadership team released *2024: The Future Our Students Deserve*, an innovative, new strategic plan illustrated like a children's book that set the parish on an

ambitious course to be an "A" district by 2024 (*Exhibit 2*). In May of that year, Brumley successfully lobbied voters to pass a teacher pay raise millage with an overwhelming 72% of the vote, giving educators their first pay raise in over a decade. In a district where board members typically railed against the Superintendent, almost every board member sought to align themselves with Brumley.

When Dr. Brumley arrived at JP Schools, District Management Group had already been supporting the district with work on secondary scheduling. Brumley mentioned to the DMGroup team the challenge of improving the outcomes of his students performing behind grade level in an environment where special education costs were spiraling out of control. "We're pouring all of this money into special education, and I don't feel like we're getting a good return on our investment," Brumley said. "I feel like I'm being asked to approve [the hiring of] a paraprofessional every day, and I don't believe we're getting results for our students," he added. After learning more about DMGroup's level of expertise in this area, Brumley decided to engage DMGroup to assess the district's practices and identify how it could improve results for its students.

Total  
Schools:

**82**

Full-time  
Employees:

**6,203**

Total  
Budget:

**\$601m**

Cohort  
Graduation Rate:

**73.4%**

Number of languages  
that students speak:

**49**

83% Spanish-speakers  
7% Arabic speakers

## Exhibit 2 JEFFERSON PARISH SCHOOLS' NEW STRATEGIC PLAN



Source: Jefferson Parish Schools.

## The Work Begins

After a series of initial conversations, the DMGroup team worked with JP Schools' leaders to develop a two-part plan for the review. They agreed that DMGroup would begin by reviewing roles and responsibilities in central office departments to optimize support for students performing behind grade level, both with and without IEPs. Second, the team would conduct an in-depth review of special education practices and compare the district's practices with best practices to identify areas of strength as well as areas for improvement.

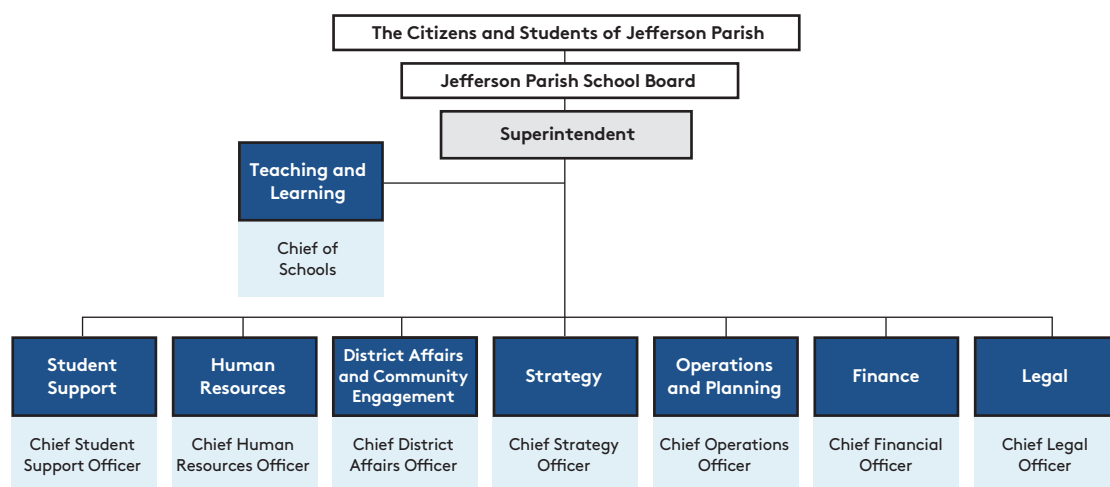
## Phase I: Roles and Responsibilities in Central Office Departments

In late January 2019, the DMGroup team visited JP Schools' central office to gain an understanding of central office leaders' roles and responsibilities, and to learn more about their perspectives on their work to support students performing below grade level. At the time, the central office was divided into eight departments under the Superintendent; these included Teaching and Learning, Student Support, Human Resources, District Affairs, Strategy, Operations, Finance, and Legal (*Exhibit 3*). To develop a comprehensive understanding of district practices, DMGroup conducted an analysis of the organizational structure and interviewed staff across all teams, with particular emphasis on leaders within Teaching and Learning, Student Support, Strategy, and Finance.

The analysis of JP Schools' organizational structure, coupled with the qualitative information gathered through a series of staff interviews, led to some key insights:

- Instruction:** The Teaching and Learning unit was charged with overseeing instruction for all students, yet had no oversight over the Student Support team, which included special education teachers and staff. These two teams rarely collaborated.
- Intervention and Compliance:** Student Support, the conventional "special education" department, oversaw the Academic / Behavior Intervention Team process (known as Response to Intervention in many districts) for general education students, but the team was primarily focused on compliance for special education students.
- Finance:** As in most districts, the Finance team, managed by the Chief Financial Officer, focused primarily on creating budgets and financial projections for the general fund. The Chief Financial Officer also worked closely with the Executive Director of Federal Grants to manage most federal grants, such as Title 1. However, neither the CFO nor the Executive Director of Federal Grants had visibility or control over the \$11 million in IDEA special education spending, which was managed by a single analyst within Student Support.

### Exhibit 3 JP SCHOOLS ORGANIZATIONAL CHART AS OF JANUARY 2019



Source: Jefferson Parish Schools.

Based on these findings, DMGroup recommended three changes to JP Schools' organizational structure:

**1. Bring special education instruction into the Teaching and Learning unit.** The Teaching and Learning function should be responsible for the instruction of all students, including students with disabilities, students in poverty, students who are behind grade level, and English language learners. While there are important differences among these cohorts of students, the core elements of good instruction are common for nearly all students. Special education instruction should live within Teaching and Learning, instead of being separated and under Student Support. The specific recommendation was to create a new position — Executive Director of Special Education Instruction — within the Teaching and Learning unit.

**2. Teaching and Learning should oversee instruction for students behind grade level, and Student Support should shift its focus more fully toward compliance.** Special education is a broad, multipart function for large districts. In many cases, the perceived threat of lawsuits leads special education departments to optimize for compliance at the expense of instructional time. Districts can separate out these functions to ensure that both are given the needed focus and resources. For JP Schools, the specific recommendation was

to shift responsibility for special education instruction to Teaching and Learning, and then reorganize Student Support under two executive directors: an Executive Director of Compliance and Appraisal and an Executive Director of Health and Related Services (to work with speech, family services, and other providers).

**3. Manage special education spending with the same strategy, oversight, and controls as other district spending.** Managing special education resources effectively is critical and requires budget expertise. Districts typically use many funding sources to provide services to students with disabilities, but too often, these grants and funding sources are siloed, leading to a lack of coordination of staff paid from different budgets. Students are served best when staffing and services are planned strategically, rather than in a piecemeal fashion that reflects the different funding sources. For JP Schools, this recommendation meant shifting the IDEA budget and its budget analyst under the umbrella of the Executive Director of Federal Grants to allow for greater management of special education spending and better collaboration with the Chief Finance Officer.



## Phase II: An In-Depth Review of Special Education

The DMGroup team coupled the analysis of the organizational structure with a deep analysis of current special education practices, processes, and documents. As part of these analyses, the team conducted a series of visits to both high- and low-performing schools to observe classroom instruction and methodologies. During these visits, the team interviewed principals and other school-based staff in order to obtain a rich understanding of their experience of working with students behind grade level. Simultaneously, the team also analyzed a trove of data from the district, ranging from identification rates by disability to achievement results to cost data.

Right away, the DMGroup team noticed a few areas for further investigation:

- Student placement varied widely by school. A student who received services in a general education setting in one school might be placed in a small, self-contained class at another school.
- Staff had differing perspectives on each setting's level of support. This was especially true for the "generic" setting.
- Tier 1 instruction often didn't reach students with exceptional learning needs.
- Most students who struggled received core content instruction from special education teachers who worked across at least two grades and in more than one subject area.
- Some paraprofessionals worked individually with students at their desks while others sat in the back of the classroom during instructional time.
- Special education classrooms were physically set apart from general education rooms in many schools.

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### School Staff Share Their Schedules

Once the DMGroup team returned from its school visits, the team shifted its focus to gaining a granular understanding of how school-based staff spent their time each day. To capture detailed data on how staff spend their time, the team used DMGroup's proprietary schedule-sharing software called dmPlanning. For a one-week period, all staff who work with students who struggle were asked to enter details about their work into the user-friendly software program (*Exhibit 4*).

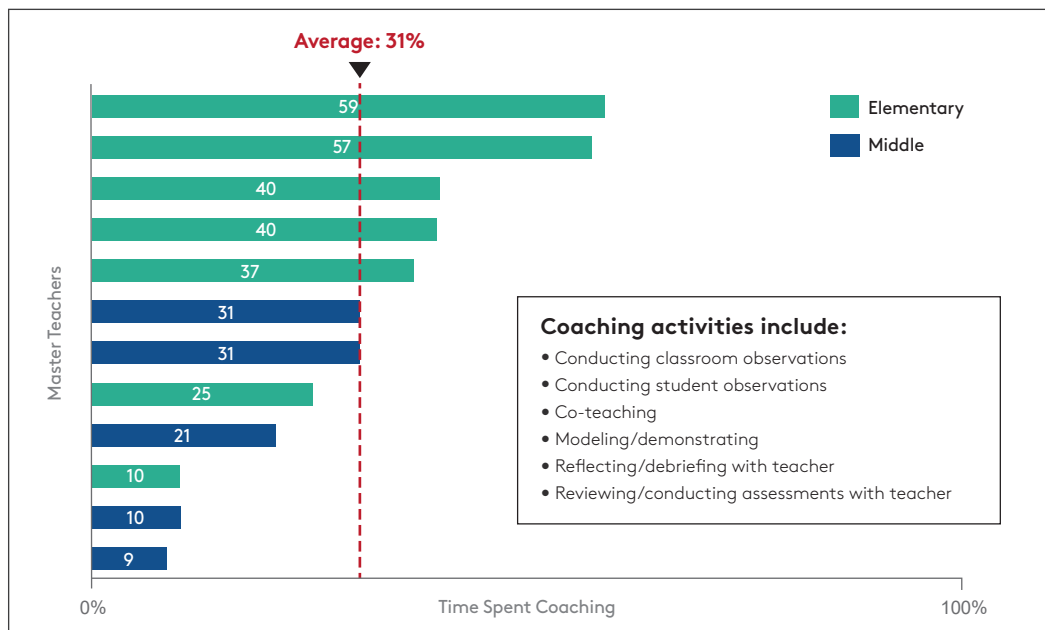
Working closely with Ms. Gabrielle Misfeldt, the district's Chief Strategy Officer, the team sent invitations to 1,459 staff in 26 roles across JP Schools who worked with students who struggle. During the week of March 11, 2019, each of these staff members were asked to log in to dmPlanning to share and document how they spent their time supporting students. By the end of the week-long schedule-sharing period, 1,152 staff members (79%) had participated and shared their schedules with DMGroup.

**Exhibit 4 A USER SCREEN FROM DMPLANNING, DMGROUP'S SCHEDULE-SHARING SOFTWARE**

The screenshot displays the 'Enter your typical weekly schedule' form in the dmPlanning software. The form includes dropdown menus for 'School' (Westwood Middle School), 'Day' (Monday), 'Start time' (8:00 am), and 'End time' (9:00 am). Below these are dropdowns for 'Primary activity' (Direct Instruction/Support), 'Setting' (General education classroom), and 'Topic' (Math). A list of activities is shown, with 'Direct Instruction/Support' selected. At the bottom, there are tabs for the days of the week (Monday through Friday) and a time range from 8:00 AM to 9:00 AM.

Source: DMGroup.

### Exhibit 5 MASTER TEACHERS SPEND ONLY 31% OF THEIR TIME COACHING



Source: DMGroup and Jefferson Parish Schools. Data from week of March 11, 2019.

## Findings and Opportunities

With schedule-sharing data complete, the DMGroup team spent the next month analyzing data, synthesizing findings, comparing findings to best practices, and compiling a findings report. After calls with Dr. Brumley, the DMGroup team returned to JP Schools in May to share four key actionable opportunities to improve special education service delivery:

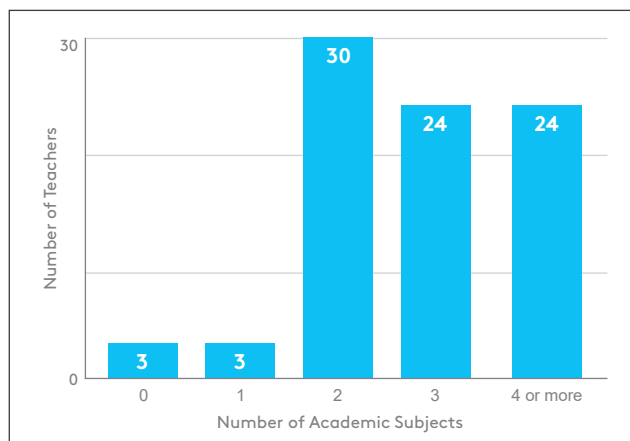
**1. Ensure that general education teachers deliver strong Tier 1 instruction and are well equipped to differentiate for all students in their classrooms.** This recommendation aligned with Dr. Brumley's "Three Big Rocks." While the first of these rocks addressed Tier 1 curriculum specifically, all three articulate the district's focus on strong instruction for all students. Indeed, focus group participants also echoed the same need. One participant shared, "Best practice is best practice for all students, and we should ensure all teachers understand best practices in implementing Tier 1." However, the DMGroup team found that some focus group participants perceived the Three Big Rocks to be contradictory for students with disabilities. On one hand, teachers were told to differentiate and meet the needs of all students, as indicated in student IEPs.

At the same time, teachers were told to keep up with the district's Tier 1 curriculum, as described in the first "rock." These mixed messages left staff uncertain about curricular expectations for students who struggle.

As part of the emphasis on Tier 1 instruction, Dr. Brumley had increased focus on coaching by creating 14 "master teacher" roles at the elementary and middle school levels in the 2018-2019 school year. However, schedule-sharing data found that master teachers were spending only 31% of their time on average directly coaching teachers, with other time spent on other academic initiatives and other duties (*Exhibit 5*). With the district's expansion of the master teacher role, DMGroup recommended that the district consider further codifying the role to ensure master teachers were getting to do more of what they were hired to do—coach.

**2. Confirm that staff with deep content expertise and training are providing interventions to students with mild-to-moderate special needs and to other students behind grade level.** Special education roles are consistently among the hardest to fill, in part due to the overwhelming number of hats these staff are asked to wear.

**Exhibit 6 78 OUT OF 84 ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TEACH MULTIPLE ACADEMIC SUBJECTS**



Source: DMGroup and Jefferson Parish Schools. Data from week of March 11, 2019.

Time and again, research has shown that special education teachers are more successful when they can become subject experts, rather than teaching across multiple content areas. In JP Schools, schedule-sharing data showed that 78 out of 84 elementary special education teachers taught both reading and math (*Exhibit 6*). Given this finding, the DMGroup team recommended that the district allow their special education teachers to specialize and assign teachers to their areas of instructional expertise.

- 3. Clearly define models of support to create a continuum of services and provide training to administrators and staff on the different programs and services available for students.** Large school districts like JP Schools have a wide variety of special education settings to meet the array of students' needs. To clarify where students

should be placed, districts should ideally have clear guidelines defined, communicated, and adhered to with fidelity. DMGroup found that JP Schools had few guidelines, which led to inconsistency in the provision of services. One related service provider commented, "The generic setting is a potluck. Generic could be self-contained to full inclusion and anywhere in between. It's totally dependent on the school and administration." Moreover, despite JP Schools' focus on inclusive practices, schedule-sharing data showed that 65% of its special education teachers spent most of their time in substantially separate settings (*Exhibit 7*). With such varying experiences across schools and students spending so much time in separate settings, DMGroup recommended that the district establish clear guidelines to provide consistency in special education models and ensure the most inclusive setting whenever possible.

- 4. Refine how paraprofessionals are allocated to schools and focus the role of paraprofessionals on supporting students with health, safety, and/or severe needs.** Data showed that Jefferson employed 13 paraprofessionals per 1,000 students, a rate 1.8 times greater than similar districts (*Exhibit 8*). Furthermore, focus group participants had mixed views on their effectiveness. One participant shared that "some teachers use paraprofessionals as assistants," while another said, "Many teachers don't know how to manage paraprofessionals." However, most concerning was DMGroup's finding that JP Schools' paraprofessionals were spending about one-third of their time delivering instruction to students—even though content-strong teachers are those best equipped to support students who struggle.

**Exhibit 7 SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS SPENT 65% OF TIME IN SELF-CONTAINED SETTINGS DESPITE DISTRICT EMPHASIS ON INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**

Role	Criteria	Number of FTE*	% of Total FTE
Inclusion Special Education Teacher	Teachers spend <b>60% or less of their time</b> in substantially separate settings.	154 FTE	35%
Self-Contained Special Education Teacher	Teachers spend <b>more than 60% of their time</b> in substantially separate settings.	285 FTE	65%
Total		439 FTE	100%

\*These FTE include only staff who participated in schedule sharing and excludes special education teachers in the Alternative setting

Source: DMGroup and Jefferson Parish Schools. Data from week of March 11, 2019.



Based on the findings, DMGroup advised the district to reinstate a position to review paraprofessional staffing requests. Additionally, the DMGroup team advised the district to develop guidelines to ensure that students who struggle receive academic support from content-strong teachers and that paraprofessionals focus their time on student support rather than instruction.

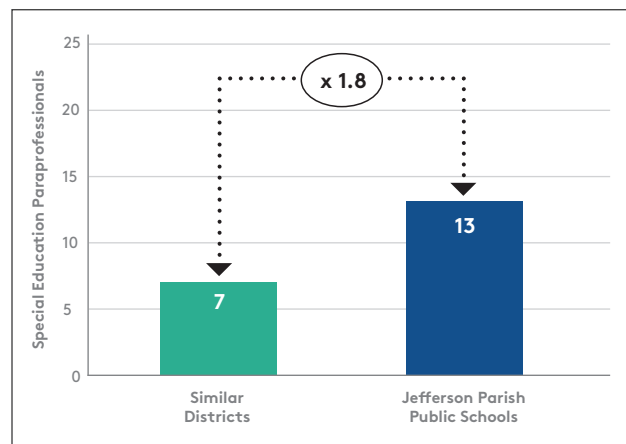
## Jefferson Parish Schools Takes Action

When DMGroup shared the full findings at the district leadership meeting, participants reacted with a combination of shock, determination, and excitement. Dr. Brumley announced that he would be implementing DMGroup's recommendations to reorganize the central office, and that more shifts would follow. "Finally!" exclaimed one executive director. "We can have teaching and learning for all of our kids, not just general education kids!"

With regard to improving service delivery, the DMGroup team asked members at the district leadership meeting to evaluate each of the four opportunities presented based on two criteria: impact on student learning and feasibility of implementation. Groups debated the merits and drawbacks of each opportunity by using the impact-feasibility matrix (*Exhibit 9*). In the end, everyone agreed that each of the four opportunities was both high impact and highly feasible. Dr. Gray, the Chief of Schools, had ranked every opportunity the highest on both impact and feasibility scales, and when pushed to prioritize them, he declared, "We owe it to Jefferson Parish's students to do everything in our power to help our students who struggle. And we can't afford to wait any longer."

Since then, JP Schools has made major shifts in its support for students who struggle. Soon after the leadership meeting, Dr. Brumley hired Mr. AJ Pethe, who had successfully overseen curriculum and instruction in a

**Exhibit 8** SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING LEVELS PER 1,000 STUDENTS, COMPARED TO SIMILAR DISTRICTS



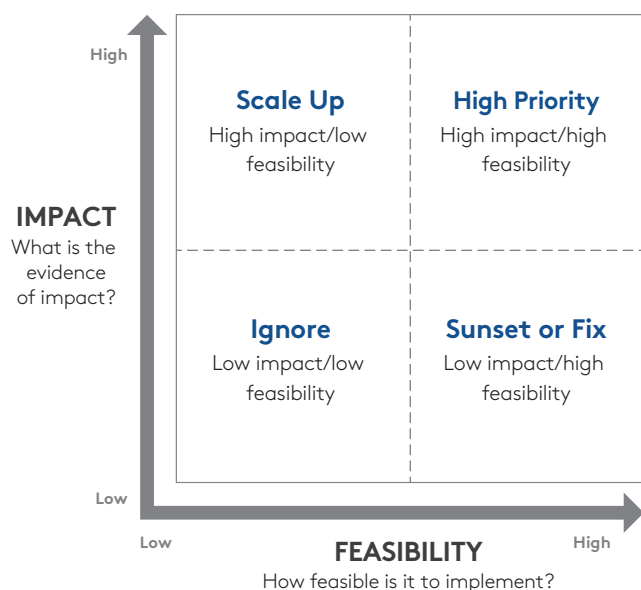
Source: DMGroup analysis.

neighboring district, to be the new Chief Student Support Officer charged with shifting the focus and strategy of the Student Support unit. Along the way, JP Schools expanded instructional coaching, so that as of the 2019-2020 school year, every school has access to a master teacher.

Already, the district is seeing results from these changes under Dr. Brumley's leadership: in November, JP Schools announced that it had improved on its state report card for the first time since 2015. More of the district's students are graduating, with their cohort graduation rate increasing by nearly two points. Its students earned nearly 10,000 hours of eligible college credit a year through programs like Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment. JP Schools was one of only eight districts in Louisiana to maintain its average ACT composite score. And, the district was able to retain 92% of their top-rated teachers, thanks in large part to the educator pay raise millage that voters passed.

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***JP Schools' paraprofessionals were spending about one-third of their time delivering instruction to students—even though content-strong teachers are those best equipped to support students who struggle.***

**Exhibit 9 THE IMPACT-FEASIBILITY MATRIX**

Source: DMGroup analysis.

## Conclusion

When he reflects on his team's work with students who struggle, Dr. Brumley is pleased with the district's progress. "It's easy to get so caught up in the day-to-day challenges that we don't have time to look back on how far we've actually come. Our district performance score increased for the first time in four years. We earned a B

for student growth. Over a third of our schools were recognized for exceptional growth. Seven schools went up a letter grade, and another eight improved their score by at least five points." And yet, he knows that the team has work ahead of them. "This is difficult, overwhelming work. Even so, we have to push through each day on this mission for kids, families, and our community."

Leaders can garner many lessons from JP Schools' experience with students who struggle, but two stand out. First, district leaders often look to the schools to solve issues of student performance, but it is important to examine the role of the central office. Conducting a systems-level review and identifying each leader's role—both central and school-based—proved to be critical to improving how the district supports students. Second, Dr. Brumley and his team's bold approach to change management and the speed with which they implemented the various recommendations drove the rapid improvement. Summarizing his view on change management, Dr. Brumley recently said, "We're not going to take on the elephant one bite at a time. We're going to eat it all at once." The combination of organizational shifts and changes to service delivery are driving holistic change that is making a difference. Jefferson Parish's strategic plan sets the bar high, and with a team focused on doing what it takes, JP Schools is poised to make even greater gains for its students. ♦

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*We owe it to Jefferson Parish's students to do everything in our power to help our struggling students. And we can't afford to wait any longer.*

– Dr. James Gray  
Chief of Schools





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