

# The Advocate

## More Baton Rouge students aren't native English speakers; audit says schools are falling short

- BY CHARLES LUSSIER | Staff writer
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Changes are on tap after an independent audit revealed an array of problems in how Baton Rouge public schools teach students whose native language is not English, a fast-growing group in a district [that's been losing students in recent years](#).

The audit, conducted last year by [The Council of Great City Schools](#), portrays the school system's English as Second Language, or ESL, program as haphazard, understaffed, short on instructional materials, out of touch with education research, strategically adrift, excluded from key decision-making and lacking clear academic goals for students trying to master an unfamiliar language.

The audit, one of three conducted in Baton Rouge by the Washington, D.C.-based Council, is already prompting changes. It has accelerated an overhaul of the district's ESL program, with new leadership hiring 10 ESL coaches, setting up a special class for immigrants and newcomers, adopting new ESL curricula and creating new lesson plans for students across the district.

Supt. Sito Narcisse has raised the profile of ESL since taking over the state's second-largest traditional school district in early 2021, forming a new ESL office and tapping Twin Oaks Elementary principal Cesar Rico to lead it.

"I was born in Honduras. I came here when I was 4 years old so I totally understand exactly what a lot of our kids are going through," Rico told the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board during [a Feb. 16 presentation on the audit](#).

Rico thanked the auditors for their insights and said he's already pinched ideas from them about ways to improve.

Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, told board members that the new ESL office is a good first step.

"We commend the district on establishing that and recognize that coming in," Hart said.

The Council has completed three audits of the school system. The previous ones focused on human resources and [special education](#). All three were conducted at the invitation of Narcisse. East Baton Rouge is one of 78 urban districts that are members of the Council.

Narcisse emphasized the fast ESL growth seen in Baton Rouge, saying “we have almost 10 families that come per month.” He said he wants to get ahead of that influx.

“Being in other districts, I’ve seen where the districts would wait and as that population would become larger and larger, then it becomes more of a crisis mode,” Narcisse said.

About 3,600 children in Baton Rouge public schools — 9% of all students are considered English Learners, or EL. That’s more than double the number a decade ago. Jefferson Parish is the only school district with more such children in Louisiana.

Almost every Baton Rouge school has at least one EL child and some schools have a lot.

Riveroaks Elementary has the most EL children, 207, more than double the number that school educated a decade ago. Highlands Elementary has the highest percentage of such children, 43.9%. That’s six times the percentage of EL children the school educated in 2012.

Rico said the EL population in Baton Rouge is largely Hispanic and comes, like he did, from Honduras and other countries in Central America. But it also includes children from the Middle East, Vietnam and other countries.

The growth in EL students is similar to growth among all Hispanic students. The school system currently educates about 5,700 Hispanic children. That’s tripled in the past decade. Hispanic children now outnumber White children.

Board member Carla Powell, a social studies teacher, recalls teaching at Belaire High years back as “an overwhelming number of EL students” enrolled at that school.

“We didn’t know how to meet the needs of those students,” Powell said.

That remains a problem.

“ELs and EL community concerns are largely unknown to the district and absent from the district’s vision and plans,” [according to the 174-page audit](#).

Unlike private consulting firms, the Council’s evaluation teams are made up of school administrators who work for urban school districts in the fields being evaluated. Two of those on the ESL audit of Baton Rouge work for the public school district in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The six-member team conducted interviews in February 2022 with staff, teachers and parents. They then conducted an extensive data review.

Here are some of their findings:

- Although it has increased recently, the ESL office still lacks sufficient staff to handle the growing number of EL students, and schools in general struggle to find translators, often relying on Google Translate in their absence.
- The Baton Rouge school district fails to set “specific, measurable, actionable goals” for EL students at all levels. Auditors recommend adding measures of EL student performance to [the district’s academic scorecard](#).
- While part of Narcisse’s extended cabinet, Rico is not part of the top tier cabinet and has not been party to important decisions about curriculum, literacy instruction and staffing: “It was unclear to the Council team how much of the EL issues percolate up to the first tier of the cabinet.”
- Educators rely too much on written multiple choice tests and should offer more ways for EL students to show what they know: “Specifically, staff did not recognize the important role of oral language in developing foundational skills for ELs.”
- Parents of children who are not native English speakers have trouble finding information in Spanish and other languages and often have little knowledge of popular options such as magnet and gifted programs.

Hart told the school board a key problem is that the district turns to ESL staff to tackle problems with students learning English rather than involving the rest of the district, especially regular classroom teachers.

“Quite often the general education teacher saw the work of educating English language learners as the EL teacher’s or paraprofessional’s job, not theirs,” Hart said.

Board member Mike Gaudet said the audit and the school district’s ESL revamp are much needed.

“When I first got on the board, we recognized the problem but it was a shotgun approach, it was a program here, a step here,” Gaudet said. “This is the first systematic approach I’ve seen.”