

From the Desk of Jason El Koubi

Invest in our Schools, Invest in our Future

Great things are happening in schools across Acadiana. Eight of the nine public school districts in the nine-parish One Acadiana region saw improvements in their District Performance Score this past year. Vermilion Parish is now an “A” school district, and several other Acadiana districts are well on their way to “A” status, including the Lafayette Parish School System (LPSS).

In fact, LPSS saw its strongest academic gains since the State introduced the District Performance Score system in 2001. This growth can be attributed to a steady, positive working relationship among the Lafayette Parish School Board,

Superintendent Dr. Don Aguillard, and district personnel, as well as to teachers and staff effectively implementing the district’s recently adopted “Vision 2020” academic plan.

While LPSS is well on the way to becoming an “A” school system, **the district’s school facilities are inadequate to serve the current and future student population.**

Lafayette Parish lost a key funding source for public school facilities after a prior millage – which funded the construction of 36 schools in 32 years – was allowed to roll off the books, starting in the late 1980s. **Because we have been underfunding**

our public school facilities for decades, LPSS has become dependent on portable buildings, with more than 400 temporary classrooms across the district.

Temporary classrooms challenge learning. Students struggle to hear their teacher over rain on the metal roofs, and children – as young as kindergarten and first grade – have to move through the rain and other bad weather to get to these freestanding metal buildings. In addition, schools’ core service areas, like cafeterias and restrooms, are aging and insufficiently sized.



This February, the School Board voted unanimously to call **an election, to be held on April 29**, for a 10-year, 1/2-cent sales tax dedicated to specific school facility improvements. The proposal would remove and replace 59% of the district’s temporary classrooms and is intended as phase 1 of a more comprehensive facilities solution.

A proposed 1/2 cent sales tax is expected to eliminate a majority of temporary classrooms over the 10-year life of the dedicated tax. No tax will be collected on purchases of food or drugs.

This proposal is fully consistent with four guiding principles developed by a steering team of One Acadiana leaders:

1. **Focus on eliminating temporary classrooms with a geographic balance of projects across the district:** The proposal would replace 248 temporary classrooms with permanent structures at 12 school sites spread throughout the parish.
2. **Limit expenses through simple, cost-effective construction methods:** Most of the projects primarily involve classroom wing additions, which will follow a standard, functional design and reduce costs.

3. **Provide transparency and dedicate funds for specific projects:** The revenues that will be generated are 100% dedicated, with \$194.5 million over 10 years dedicated to specific projects and an additional \$3 million per year dedicated to ongoing maintenance.
4. **Demonstrate how the district will maintain accountability to voters:** The proposal requires an annual external audit of the proceeds. The results of this audit will be presented during the first quarter of every year at a special board meeting.

Because the School Board’s proposal reflects these principles, and after months of engagement with LPSS leaders, One Acadiana’s Board of Directors has voted to support this important initiative. **We believe Lafayette Parish’s aging and overcrowded public schools, and our dependence on portable buildings, is too important a problem to continue to ignore.**

Last year, One Acadiana released a “Target Industry Strategy,” which assesses our region’s competitive strengths and weaknesses and provides a roadmap for economic opportunities. Jay Garner, President of nationally recognized Garner Economics, led the study. **Garner identified Lafayette public school facilities as one of our competitive disadvantages in being able to attract businesses to locate and expand in our region.**

Garner shared that his recent tour of Lafayette Parish gave him the impression of a community that does not invest in its

public school facilities and thus may not place a high value on education. He encouraged the Acadiana region to invest in its public schools.

The LPSS proposal on the ballot this April is an investment decision being asked of Lafayette Parish voters. It is an investment we can afford and one that will pay dividends for our children and for our economy. While it will not solve all of our challenges, it is a major step in the right direction.

**1/2-cent.
 100% dedicated.
 248 permanent classrooms.**

Early voting starts **April 15-April 22** (except Sunday and holidays), and election day is **April 29**.

Focused on Forward,
 Jason




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