

Ruston 21 heralds education

Laura Bond, *Reporter*

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The contributions a strong school system makes to the community are vastly underestimated, says one local businessman.

Rusty Woodard is co-chair of the Ruston 21 education committee, a 12-member team put together by Ruston Mayor Dan Hollingsworth to study the Lincoln Parish Public School System.

"It's been accepted that Louisiana Tech and Grambling State universities are economic engines for this community," Woodard said. "The Ruston 21 committee is a strong believer that our public school system as a whole is rivaling Tech and GSU in its impact."

Woodard said many people make the false assumption that the only reason having good schools in the community is important is so their children will get a good education. The benefits, he said, are much greater.

"The public school system can be a tremendous economic boost for the community," he said. "Houses and businesses are worth more because you have people who can come and trade with you who can pay. And people with more economic abilities are attracted to the community because they know a good education is available for their kids."

Education committee liaison Cathi Cox said having an effective school system in the community also lowers the crime rate.

"When you have factors that positively affect quality of life, it's across the board," she said. "You have more educated folks coming out of the schools and into the community."

Cox said the group has been on a fact-finding mission, bringing in informational speakers and having Cox make visits to other schools with low-dropout rates or high academic performances.

Woodard said one public school system they have looked at is West Feliciana. In the most recent District Performance Scores, West Feliciana ranked No. 2 in the state, as compared with Lincoln Parish, which ranked No. 22.

"Anytime someone is doing a good job we look at what they are doing," Woodard said. "West Feliciana is consistently ranked one or two in the state. Their demographics are much like ours, and they don't have any universities."

Woodard said one factor that seems to contribute to West Feliciana Parish's success is a school-based health system.

"A couple of systems we have looked at have offered expanded health care at the schools," he said. "Because of a joint project with local doctors and businesses who fund it, they found a more efficient way of making sure children are receiving the health care they need and not missing school. They find kids are coming to school more often and not having the absentee issues."

Woodard said one of the positive findings uncovered about the Lincoln Parish School System is that it has the most highly qualified teachers in the state.

The formation of the education committee is part of the total Ruston 21 initiative, which is the city's

master plan for the future.

To hear more

- What: Education project update for Ruston 21
- When: noon Thursday
- Where: North Central Alliance Partners in Prevention meeting at Methodist Children's Home chapel.

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