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## Report Highlights

# Structure and Use of Learning Pods in Louisiana Elementary and Secondary Public Schools

*Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE)*

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## Why We Conducted This Review

This report provides information about the structure and use of learning pods in traditional public and charter schools in Louisiana. Learning pods consist of at least 10 students who are enrolled in a separate location from the main campus of a school and are considered a part of the enrollment of that school.

## What We Found

Overall, we found that the legislature may wish to consider strengthening the laws regarding learning pods in order to better oversee and regulate their use in Louisiana.

### 1. Who approves the use of learning pods in traditional public or charter schools?

Learning pods implemented by BESE-authorized charter schools must receive a written notice of approval from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), while local school boards are directed by regulation to adopt policies and procedures related to the establishment of learning pods associated with schools they govern (traditional public schools and locally-authorized charter schools).

### 2. How many learning pods exist in Louisiana?

According to LDOE, as of the 2022-23 academic year, there are five learning pods associated with two charter schools operating in Louisiana for a total of 285 students. However, learning pod use in Louisiana public schools is not comprehensively tracked by LDOE.

### 3. Does a charter school have to amend its charter contract before opening a learning pod?

BESE-authorized charter schools do not have to amend their charter contracts to open a learning pod unless certain enrollment criteria are met, as outlined in regulation. Locally-authorized charter schools must follow the policies and procedures adopted by the school board that authorizes them.

However, learning pods have been splitting the administrative enrollment of students attending the same learning pod between multiple main campuses within the same charter school network, which may allow those schools to circumvent BESE's regulations about when schools need to obtain a material amendment to their charter contracts.

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## What We Found (Cont.)

### 4. Can learning pods charge tuition or attendance fees?

No, under the clear language of R.S. 17:3991(E)(3), a charter school may not charge its students any tuition or attendance fees of any kind.

### 5. Are learning pods required to offer the same services as the main school campuses?

No, while students at learning pods must have access to all services available to students at the main school campus, including required special education services, these services are not required to be offered at each pod location, as long as students can access them at the main school campus.

### 6. Who is responsible for ensuring learning pod locations are safe for students?

Neither LDOE nor the local school district is required by state regulations to approve the location and structure of a learning pod in a charter school, and LDOE is not required to approve the location and structure of a learning pod in traditional public schools.

### 7. Are learning pod students counted as part of the main campus for Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) funding and school performance scores (SPS)?

Yes, learning pod students are counted as part of the enrollment of the public-school governing authority for MFP funding and school performance scores.

### 8. Can learning pods be used to inflate student performance at low performing charter schools or traditional public schools?

Yes, because students who attend a learning pod are included in the performance measures for the main school campus, it is possible to use learning pods to artificially improve school performance scores at poorly performing schools in order to avoid consequences for chronically poor student performance. Schools may be able to improve their academic performance by opening learning pods in locations likely to attract higher-income families—essentially recruiting wealthier students rather than improving the performance of existing students. Any economic and racial segregation caused by this strategy may go undetected because learning pod student demographics are not reported separately from the demographics of the main campus.

This may have occurred during the 2021-22 academic year at a learning pod called Red Stick Academy, which was associated with South Baton Rouge Charter Academy, a charter school authorized by the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board (EBRPSB). The demographics of students who attended Red Stick Academy were very different from the demographics of students who physically attended the South Baton Rouge Charter Academy main campus. For example, students at the main campus were more than four times as likely to be economically disadvantaged than students at the learning pod, as shown in the exhibit on the next page.

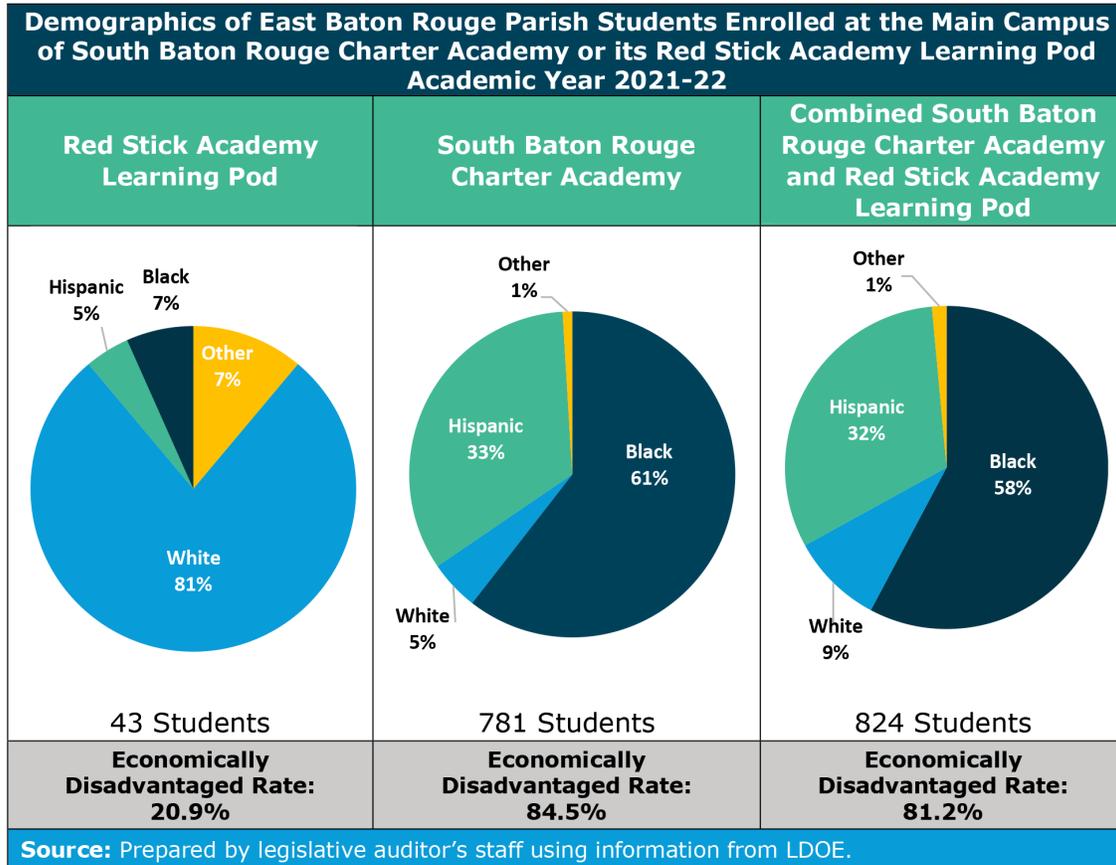
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## What We Found (Cont.)



Students at the Red Stick Academy learning pod also scored much higher on their 2021-22 standardized tests than students at South Baton Rouge Charter Academy's main campus. Because the 2022 SPS was based on the performance of students at the main campus and at the learning pod, South Baton Rouge Charter Academy earned a C-rating on its 2022 SPS, which is the minimum score required of a charter school by the EBRPSB in order to be renewed. The school was subsequently renewed in January of 2023.

Without test scores of students at the learning pod, South Baton Rouge Charter Academy would have received a D on its 2022 SPS and failed to meet the EBRPSB's criteria for renewal.

**9. Can charter schools or traditional school districts switch the main school campus that learning pod students are associated with for administrative purposes (i.e., students remain at the same learning pod location), which may help improve performance at another main school campus?**

Neither state law nor regulations address whether charter schools or traditional public schools can switch which main school campus learning pod students are associated with, which may help improve student performance at the main school campus.