

on campus

Lab school redux

Educators to focus on best practices, teacher preparation



This preliminary architectural rendering shows a new lab school with a modern, open style.

Wanted: land, followed by students and teachers. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette is forging ahead with plans for a laboratory school. The University of Louisiana System Board of Supervisors approved the concept earlier this year. Once property and state legislative approval are secured, the not-yet-named lab school will provide its students with an education that relies on model teaching methods and an innovative curriculum. Future teachers enrolled at the University will gain classroom experience there. Education-based research will be conducted and shared with school districts. Professional development workshops for educators will be held in

evenings and during summers. The school will be “not only a great learning environment, but will benefit the entire region – and beyond – by serving as a hub for teaching practices and theory, research and collaboration,” said Dr. Nathan Roberts, dean of UL Lafayette’s College of Education. Kindergarten through third-grade students will be taught at the school, at least initially. Proposals call for expanding through eighth grade during the first few years. Roberts envisions a high school at some point, based, in part, on early interest expressed by educators and parents. “Teachers have already inquired about how to obtain positions and I’ve already been asked, ‘How do I complete

an application for my child?’” he said. The school will begin with two classes per grade, with 22-25 students per class. The application process hasn’t been finalized. “We won’t be an elite school. The student body will fall in line with the number of students in Lafayette Parish who receive free or reduced-price lunches. About 60 percent will pay full tuition. Another 25 percent will pay a reduced amount and 15 percent will pay nothing,” Roberts explained. Most, if not all, College of Education students preparing to become teachers will gain experience in lab school classrooms, said Aimee Barber, an instructor in the University’s

Department of Curriculum and Instruction and chair of the lab school project. She leads a committee of faculty and staff members overseeing establishment of the school. “Our hope is that every student who comes through our program will spend time in the lab school at some point,” she said.

Roberts said student-teachers are already required to gain field experience in local school systems. “One of the biggest concerns that surrounding school districts had was that they didn’t want all of our student-teachers at the lab school. So, we absolutely want to make sure student-teachers get full experiences everywhere.”

Many area school districts, leaders and community organizations have expressed support for the lab school. In a letter, Jerome Puyan, superintendent of Vermilion Parish Schools, stated: “All Acadiana schools would gain better teachers, more leaders, more professional development and more opportunities to learn new strategies and increase awareness of teacher needs.”

Classrooms will be managed by “lead” teachers who hold at least a master’s degree. They won’t, however, teach alone. “There could be three or four student teachers in a class at any given time. How ideal is that, to have 25 kids with four adults working with them?” Roberts said.

Student-teachers will be instructed in and out of the classroom. Innovative educational practices that promotes “learning by doing” will be an essential part of the curriculum, said Dr. Doug Williams. The professor, who directs the University’s Center for Innovative Learning and Advancement Technology, said students who are studying green energy, for example, might build wind turbines or travel to a solar farm.

“The idea is to empower students, show them that learning is demanding, but it is also fun, an adventure. It also underscores the relevance of learning. Solving real-world problems lets children understand why they’re doing science or math,” Williams said.

The new lab school won’t be the University’s first. The F.M. Hamilton Laboratory School, founded in 1939, was an on-campus elementary school where student-teachers honed their classroom skills. It closed in 1977. Roberts said that, at the time, there was “a trend away from lab schools, with the idea that they were not realistic sites for people to learn to teach. That thinking is old-fashioned.”



This 1939 photo shows a classroom in F.M. Hamilton Laboratory School on campus.

The nation’s first lab school was founded at the University of Chicago in 1896. According to an article published in 2015 by *Education Week*, a national newspaper that covers K-12 education, the number of lab schools peaked at about 200 in the mid-1960s.

That number has dropped below 100. Post World War II attitudes were a key factor in the decline. Conventional education models replaced progressive ones. The shift was rooted in a common belief, largely influenced by federal policymakers, that traditional curriculums would better produce a workforce with the technical knowledge and skills to help the country combat nuclear threats from the Soviet Union and win the space race. Cold War anxiety left a lasting, but not permanent, impact on K-12 education, according to some scholars.

Progressive education models, and the need for lab schools, have returned. Some universities and colleges in North Carolina, for instance, will form lab schools to collaborate with public school systems after a directive from state lawmakers last year. “Eight lab schools will be started on campuses in the University of North Carolina System,” Barber said.

UL Lafayette’s lab school will rely on a blend of state funds and tuition money, similar to ones at LSU and Southern University.

Roberts anticipates an advisory council to be established to assist with functions such as developing and implementing curriculum and with making program and policy recommendations. Curriculum at the lab school also will be shaped by research gleaned from classrooms.

“Methodology research, trying out different programs and seeing how the kids respond and how well they do, will be integral,” Roberts said.

Roberts foresees area school districts sending teachers to share their knowledge and learn from other educators. Those teachers should return to their schools with fresh ideas and concepts to share. “So, it’s not just students in the school who will benefit. There will be a ripple effect.”

Pluses for the University will extend beyond the College of Education. The lab school will provide an outlet for learning and practical experience for UL Lafayette students, professors and researchers from many colleges, departments and centers.

“The School of Kinesiology, for example, will be able to work with students on health care and nutrition. The Counseling and Testing Center and the College of Nursing and Allied Health Professions are two others that will have many opportunities to work with young students,” Roberts said.

To follow the progress of this project, visit education.louisiana.edu/labschool