

# Sicily Island High School

A Case Study of a Rural High  
School Yielding Results



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Capacity Building Program

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## A Case Study of a Rural High School Yielding Results



The Rural School and Community Trust  
Capacity Building Program

Prepared with funding from the Southern Governors' Association

December 2004

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## ■ The Setting

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### Sicily Island, Louisiana

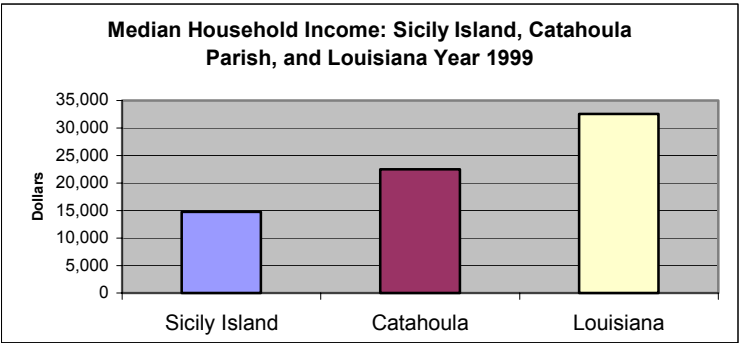
Fields stretch in every direction on Sicily Island—fields of cotton, fields of corn, fields of soybeans. And although smallholdings, barns, and houses appear occasionally along the way, the predominant vista is of flat, open fields. Located in Catahoula Parish, Sicily Island is a 0.6 square mile farming community. The small town center has undoubtedly seen better days. The main street is lined with empty and boarded-up shops, its sidewalks with old-fashioned lampshades that no longer function. Elise's, a general store, remains open and a deserted cotton gin marks the end of downtown. Five of the town's buildings are on the National Historic Register. Two churches, Pilgrim Baptist Church and Zion Baptist Church, round out the town's offerings.

The estimated 445 people who call Sicily Island home today represent nearly a 2% population decline since Census 2000. Although fewer of them make their living directly from the land now (12% according to Census 2000), the land clearly dominates the community spirit.

Apart from the farm, the bank, the general store, and the school board, there are few employment opportunities in Sicily Island. A small medical complex lies on the edge of town and a neighboring community, Clayton, has a nursing home that provides a few jobs. Mean travel time to work outside the town is 34 minutes (Citydata.com). Monroe, the nearest city with a population of over 50,000, is 55 miles to the north. As the high school principal put it, "If you live here, you know you have to drive 45 minutes to get anywhere. A store of any size is 45 minutes, the movies are 45 minutes, and the hospital is over an hour. Everyone here drives to get anywhere."

Only 58% of Sicily Island’s population, ages 25 or older, has a high school diploma and nearly 10% of the working age population is unemployed. The median household income of \$14,783 is significantly below the \$22,528 median for Catahoula Parish and less than half of the \$32,566 median for Louisiana (Figure 1). Only 58% of the population ages 25 or older have a high school diploma.

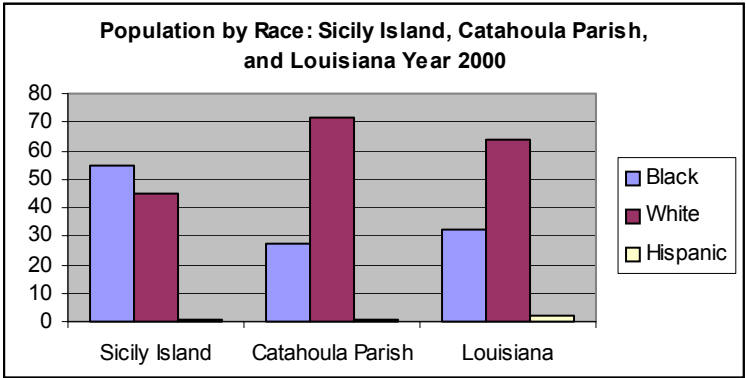
**Figure 1. Median Household Income:  
Sicily Island, Catahoula Parish, and Louisiana, Year 1999**



Source: US Census 2000

More than half of Sicily Island’s population are people of color—54.5% African American and .9% Hispanic (Figure 2).

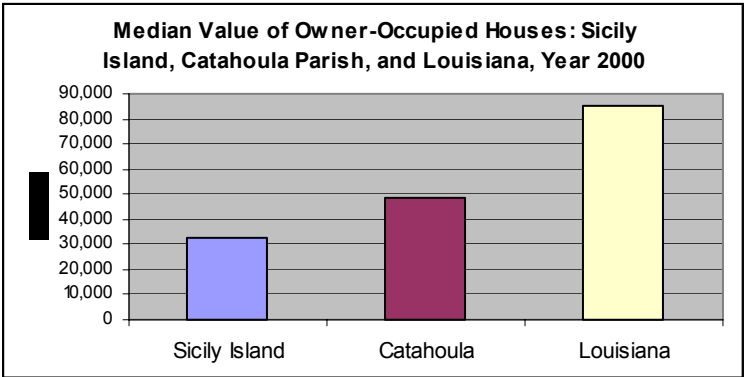
**Figure 2. Population by Race:  
Sicily Island, Catahoula Parish, and Louisiana, Year 2000**



Source: US Census 2000

Over the last eight years, one new home has been constructed in Sicily Island, at a cost of \$67,000. Significantly, the median value of owner-occupied homes in the town is \$33,000. That is 67.6% of the \$48,800 median for Catahoula Parish and only 38.8% of the \$85,000 median for the state (Figure 3). Dependence upon this small property tax base makes equity in school finance an important issue for Sicily Island.

**Figure 3. Value of Owner-Occupied Houses:  
Sicily Island, Catahoula Parish, and Louisiana, Year 2000**



Signs of better days to come are seen in the construction of a small new bank building and the newly opened Short Stop convenience store and gas station opposite it. The only road through town, Route 15, is also being repaved and widened.

**Sicily Island Schools**

Sicily Island’s schools are housed in three buildings. The K-4 elementary school and the high school sit adjacent to each other in a small complex off the main road and at the end of a street of compact residential houses. The elementary school enrolls 154 students; the high school enrolls 89. Martin Junior High School, with 125 students in grades 5-8, is outside of town about two miles down the main road.

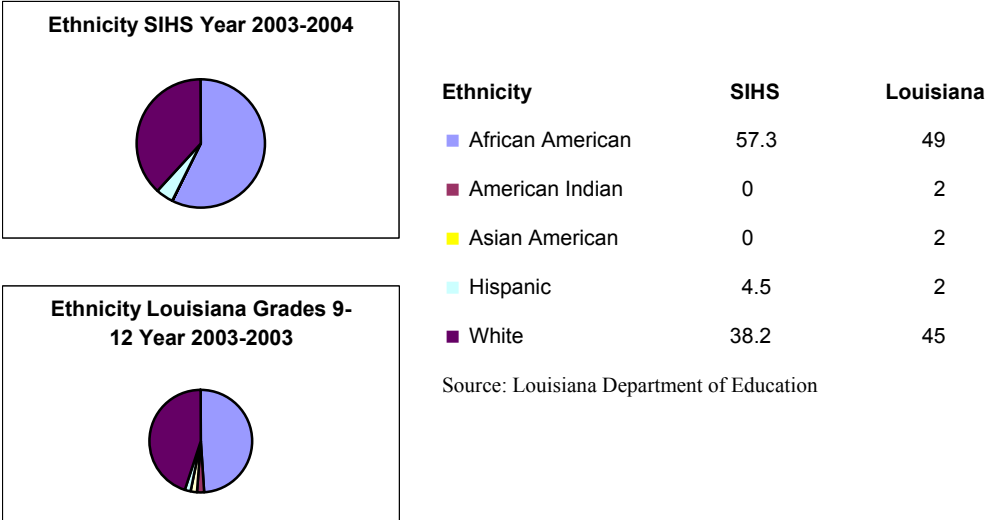
Sicily Island High School is one of 10 schools making up the Catahoula Parish School District, which serves 1,811 students in grades pre-K-12. The administrative office is in the neighboring community of Harrisonburg. Superintendent Ron Lofton lives in Sicily Island and is a former Sicily Island High School teacher. The school is housed in a two-story brick building constructed in the 1930s. Originally, two identical buildings stood side-by-side, one housing grades K-8 and the other the high school grades. In the 1960s, the elementary building was replaced with a one-story K-4 building; the junior high school was also constructed at that time.

Sicily Island High School is a Title I school with school-wide programming.

**Sicily Island High School Students**

Of the 89 students attending Sicily Island High School in 2003-2004, 47 were male and 42 were female. Fifty-one students (57.3%) were African American, 34 (38.2%) were Caucasian, and four (4.5%) were of Hispanic origin (Figure 4). Sixty-eight percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

**Figure 4. Student Ethnicity**  
Sicily Island High School and Louisiana 2003-2004



In the 2002-2003 school year, the last year for which complete records were available at the time of this report, the attendance rate at Sicily Island High School was 92.5%, slightly lower than the state rate of 93.8%. Three students dropped out in the 2002-2003 school year for a 3.2% dropout rate, compared with the district average of 4.5% and state average of 4.9%.

### Sicily Island High School Teachers and Staff

The ethnicity of the Sicily Island High School staff closely mirrors that of the community and student body. Five (55.6%) of the school's nine teachers are African American; four (44.4%) are Caucasian. The school's principal and secretary are also Caucasians. In 2002-2003, 67% of the high school teaching staff met the *No Child Left Behind* definition of highly qualified for core classes. This compares with a district average of 71% and a state average of 86%.

Catahoula Parish teachers are lower paid than teachers in neighboring parishes. District reports to the State Department of Education put the 2003-2004 beginning salary for teachers with a bachelor's degree at \$21,758, ranking them 65<sup>th</sup> among the state's 68 public school districts. More than \$10,000 separated Catahoula Parish's beginning teacher pay from that of the highest paid district in the state. With a local supplement of \$500, district salaries for all teachers with a bachelor's degree rank last among the 68 districts.

Despite the low salaries, the staff at Sicily Island High School has been stable and longstanding. Two of the nine staff members attended the school as students, as did the principal. The newest staff member has been on board for five years, the longest for 30 years. Several staff members live in the community, including the principal, and have children who are attending or have attended the school. Marguerite Krause, now in her first year as principal, taught at the school for 28 years of her 30-year teaching career.

When asked the reason for the success of Sicily Island High School and its students, Mrs. Krause points immediately to the staff: “The commitment and dedication of the staff are the reason for this school's successes.”

### Sicily Island Revenue

Catahoula Parish operated with a \$13,926,596 budget in school year 2002-2003. Of that amount, 20.44% was from local sources, 62.51% from state sources, and 17.05% from federal sources. With a per pupil expenditure of \$7,212, the district spent 67.72% of its revenue on instruction and instructional support services; 27.11% on non-instructional support and operations; .77% on facilities, and 3.51% on debt service (Louisiana Department of Education Annual Financial and Statistical Report).

## ■ On the Road to Improvement

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When asked what led the school to embark on an improvement path, the staff and principal of Sicily Island High point first to the need to offer more to students. During the 1998 school year, the staff became ever more aware of the limited electives that their small staff could offer students. Enrollment had been slowly declining over the previous five years, the school had lost its football team, and the topic of consolidation had arisen again. But the already long bus rides (up to 1.5 hours for some children) would become untenable with further consolidation. Because of the geography of the district, its division by the Black River and lack of bridges, further consolidation within the parish would be difficult.

These events coincided with the district's acquisition of a large federal technology grant and the opportunity for teachers to work together over the summer in paid professional development activities. During their time together, learning new technology skills, the staff discussed what to do with the new hardware, materials, tools, and ideas. Out of those discussions, the notion of working together to enhance the curriculum through interdisciplinary units was born.

Now when asked how teaching and learning have changed in the school over the past three to five years, the teachers answer:

- “The interdisciplinary units did it.”
- “Technology really helped us.”
- “We are now more of a learning community. We learned the new technology together and we use it to teach and develop the interdisciplinary units.”
- “We are more of a family now. We work together in the project room. We share so much more rather than go off in our own classrooms.”
- “We talk all the time about our work and consequently we talk more about students.”

- “This was a key moment for us. It changed how we function as a school and the other changes, and successes we see can all be traced back to this.”

The excitement and collegiality resulting from the interdisciplinary work among teachers has spilled over into all aspects of school life. It coincided with the standards movement and the implementation of the Louisiana testing program and resulted in changes in how the staff interacted with students.

## ■ The Improvement Payoff

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The Rural Trust examined Sicily Island’s improvement efforts and results through the lenses of its Principles and Indicators for Good High Schools—Curriculum and Instruction, Community Connectedness, Democratic Practice, Supporting Structures, Staffing, Facilities and Leadership (see attachment).

### Principle One: Curriculum and Instruction

Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live. Content and strategies are rigorous, authentic, and expansive, engaging every student in a personalized learning environment at the highest level of his or her capabilities and preparing each child well for college, work, and citizenship.

The school’s curriculum has a dual focus: teaching the basic subjects well to prepare every student for a productive life after high school and enriching the curriculum through opportunities offered by interdisciplinary units. In both areas, the staff works as a team, wearing multiple hats and emphasizing each other's strengths.

Preparation for life after school is an often-discussed topic at Sicily Island High School. From their “early stages of interest” inventories in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students are frequently asked to think hard about what they would like to do and are then helped to design a program to accomplish their goals. All students are offered job-shadowing experiences early in high school. In the spring of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, job shadowing takes place in Sicily Island and neighboring communities. Students shadow employees of the bank, nursing home, medical center, Sheriff’s Department, and school offices. A program offered in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, called “A Heck of A Summer,” places students in summer jobs for 6-8 weeks in a field in which they are interested. Many of them are pursuing careers related to that experience.

All of the career planning seems to be realistically geared to student abilities. Students are encouraged to have goals and to reach for them, but the goals set

are realistic and attainable. There is not so much encouragement to “reach for the stars” with no path to get there but rather confirmation that, for example, “nursing would be a good choice for you and here's what you should do to become a nurse.”

The nine seniors graduating in 2004 all had clear goals. Two planned to join the military, one planned to attend a Louisiana school to study elementary education, and two planned to attend a technical school to learn welding. Gas welding for oil companies is a lucrative occupation of high interest to Sicily Island students. The school's welding program is very popular and enrolls equal numbers of boys and girls. One student was going to school to become a nurse's aide, one to the University of Louisiana at Monroe to a four-year program in accounting, and one to work on his family's 600-acre farm, mostly devoted to soybeans. Finally, one was taking a job for the local cable company.

Seniors reported feeling excited and prepared for the next step in their lives and said they owed a lot to their teachers who expected the best of them and pushed them. They clearly did not want to disappoint their teachers.

Over the past five years, approximately 88% of Sicily Island's graduates have enrolled in further education. In all but two cases, excluding those students who joined the military, these students have pursued further studies within the state. Public higher education institutions within Louisiana offer tuition-free education to students who maintain appropriate standards. This is a big incentive to the Sicily Island students, most of whom could not afford further education without this support.

The hallmarks of the collaborative work among the staff are the two annual whole-school interdisciplinary projects. This strength was borne of adversity. Recognizing the school's inability to offer the courses or electives of larger high schools, the staff decided to adopt a middle school teaching approach.

For the past four years, the staff has offered two interdisciplinary projects a year to the full student body. This requires a lot of work, as all four grades participate. Consequently, units of study cannot be repeated year after year.

The staff uses the interdisciplinary units as incentives for students also. One unit offers a culminating field trip for the entire student body. The other unit offers a culminating trip for students selected on the basis of performance, improvement, or conduct. The whole-school trip has typically been related to a topic with a local focus. For example, "They Dared to Dream," a study of the Civil Rights Era, resulted in a trip to various sites in Mississippi. Another unit, focusing on the U.S. Constitution, climaxed with a trip to Washington, DC, for the 60% of the student body chosen by staff on the basis of performance or conduct. Both the local and more ambitious trips are taken towards the end of the school year, in March, April, or May.

Developing and teaching these units has brought the staff together. It has also inspired the students, engaged them in multiage groups for one period of each day, and motivated the parents and community. Usually some fundraising is necessary and these events, initiated by the staff, bring the whole community together to work toward a common goal. Consolidated Federal Programs funds are used extensively for these units.

While core classes are fairly traditional, teachers offer an array of opportunities within them. The family and consumer science classes offer several service-learning opportunities each year and the teacher coordinates the job shadowing experiences. Agricultural Sciences has an agriculture component, but departmental course offerings also vary from small engine repair for local community members to woodworking and welding (a student recently won a state level welding championship). The English, social studies, science, and mathematics courses provide the basics and try to challenge each student; however, there is a notable lack of higher-level courses. No advanced

placement classes are offered locally or via distance, and calculus was not being offered in the current school year.

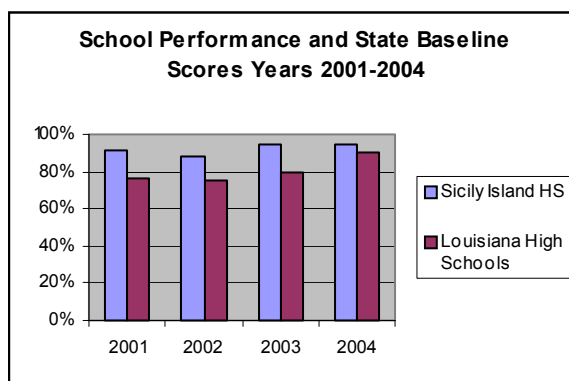
Students reported that teachers use varied approaches to teaching and learning, including project-based work, hands-on learning, and small group work, as well as individual work and lecture. Inquiry, investigation, and problem-solving regularly take place.

Classes at Sicily Island last 65 minutes; the day has six class periods and 390 instructional minutes. The school day starts promptly at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 3:00 p.m. The instructional year is 176.5 days and school runs from mid-August to the end of May. Clearly the school has limitations in terms of offerings, but every effort is being made both to teach the basics well and to provide as varied an experience for students as is feasible. The interdisciplinary experiences fill a big gap here and provide opportunities students would otherwise not have.

The school clearly places a priority on preparing for and doing well on high-stakes tests. Teachers work individually with students to address areas of weakness. Students buy into the testing preparation and take it seriously. They know how they scored the previous year and what they need to improve on, and they have goals in mind. Teachers agree to work on specific issues in class that are common areas of weakness. For example, all teachers have agreed to address vocabulary in their classes and all of them include a five-minute vocabulary section in their classes every day.

The school improvement efforts show in student test scores. Test results on the Louisiana accountability system are available for high schools since 2000. Each school receives a School Performance Score (SPS). The SPS score for Sicily Island students, including regular and special education students, has consistently been above the state baseline (Figure 5).

Figure 5. School Performance and State Baseline Scores Years 2001-2004



Source: Louisiana Department of Education School Accountability Report Card for Principals

These results put Sicily Island in the category of “Academically Above the Sate Average.” In 2000, the scores were for language arts and mathematics. In 2001 and 2002, the testing included language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Under *No Child Left Behind* provisions, Sicily Island High School made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2002-2003 in all categories and is not categorized as in need of school improvement. While the state testing system is taken seriously, assessment strategies in regular courses run the gamut and effort is made to assess each student individually. Reports go to parents every six weeks.

### Principle Two: Community Connectedness

The school is situated and structured so it is connected to the community on multiple levels. The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to learn, work, live, and play.

While good examples of community connectedness were apparent, they were very traditional in nature. The school building is only sporadically used by outside groups. While outreach takes place to parents and families, it only reaches the wider community during the service opportunities offered by Family and Consumer Science classes and by the same staff members' job shadowing experiences and job placement work. There was no evidence of

community needs or interests being used by the school in the curriculum, clubs, or after-school programming.

“Parents in Education” (PIE) programs do, however, play a big role in the school. Several times a year, parents are invited to "PIE nights." These events offer parent programming and a chance to share school information along with homemade pie, baked and served by the staff. Each teacher bakes and brings at least five pies! They seem to be a regular social event and are very well attended by 80-90% of parents. The last PIE night featured Miss Louisiana. Principal Krause claims food and entertainment are the key to PIE night's success. Parent conferences have an attendance rate of more than 90%.

### Principle Three: Democratic Practice

Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to instill. All stakeholders' voices are heard, validated, and honored in the decision-making processes affecting them.

Due to the size of the school, everyone is considered important. Everyone is needed to put on the play, to fundraise for trips, to have viable sports teams, and pretty much to accomplish anything at the school. Consequently, all children are valued and supported to be their best.

Race does not seem to be a dividing issue among students or staff. The racial balance of the school is fairly even with approximately 68% of students being children of color. When asked about racial issues, students commented, “This is not a factor here” and “We need everyone's contribution to make things happen around here.”

There were few examples of student voice playing a large role in the school. Teachers make the curriculum decisions, including those related to the interdisciplinary units. Students seemed surprised by questions about how they impacted curriculum, discipline, or issues in the school. "The teachers

decide that,” was the common response. Even co-curricular offerings seemed to be geared to some degree to teacher interests and talents. When asked, “How do students make changes in the school?” students seemed at a loss to answer. They talked about circulating a petition to get more sports offerings back and presenting the petition to the principal. To a large degree, they seemed to defer to the adults. When asked, “What if you wanted to change the rules concerning the stairwells?” they shook their heads and it seemed clear that certain topics were off limits.

### Principle Four: Supporting Structures

School policies, calendars, and resources are arranged to maximize community involvement, ensure student academic success, and provide teachers with the means to succeed.

The staff’s ability to work collaboratively to meet individual student needs is an obvious strength of the school. The school does not have a guidance counselor, so each teacher takes on that role. As a team, teachers assign each student to an advisor who is the best teacher “match” for that student. Each teacher, usually acting as mentor as well, advises eight to ten students across the grade span (i.e., two or three students at each grade level). Assignments are not made until the second semester of the students’ 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, after the staff as a whole has gotten to know all of the freshmen.

This advisor role is of particular importance at testing time. From January until the state test in April, the school offers individual tutoring to every student. Teachers stay at school Monday-Thursday until 6:00 p.m. for tutoring sessions; sessions are also offered on Saturdays and Sundays and are available for all students, not just the low performers. One student pointed out, “We all need to do our best on these tests.” Another student said, “I wouldn’t feel I was doing my best if I scored at the mastery level when I knew with some more effort I could have been in advanced.” Breakfast is served free to all students during the testing weeks.

The personalized approach to help students do their best, regardless of their academic level, is clear around the testing mandates but it does not begin or stop there. In the final semester of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the high school staff meets individually with incoming freshmen. They discuss with the students their schooling experience to date, inventory their strengths and weaknesses, and help them choose a course schedule and explore possible career paths. This conversation begins to prepare the student for high school. It also changes the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship and sets the stage for the students being treated as individuals with interests and learning goals that the teachers value. These conversations are shared with the whole staff and thus the teachers begin to know the incoming freshman class. This investment of individual time pays dividends as the new class enters the high school.

These early conversations also set the tone for the guidance relationships, which develop later. 'Making the best of yourself' and 'being your own best person' were themes constantly echoed in conversations with both staff and students. As one student put it, "We know we come from a poor place with fewer opportunities than other places. We know we really have to work hard to do our best, so when we leave we will not be disadvantaged. The teachers here at Sicily Island help us be our best. They really want us to be successful."

You can't get lost at Sicily Island. No one is written off or left to drift.

Everyone is expected to do his or her best and to leave school with a clear, realistic, and attainable goal.

Parents are included in any discipline issues. Several students reported that if a teacher noticed any changes in a student's behavior or had problems with a student, parents would be called and involved right away. Praise and prevention also play a large role in the absence of discipline issues. All teachers regularly use praise notes called "tiger notes" after the school mascot.

Teachers reported sending 3-5 notes a week home to parents praising students for academic or other reasons. Several students spoke of the staff as friends and

mentioned they liked to “hang out” with the teachers on weekends. The teachers in this small school clearly play very important and pivotal roles in the lives of their students.

The close relationship between students and adults in the school undoubtedly impacts the school’s attendance and dropout rates. The school’s 10-year goal for attendance is 93.0% and the 10-year goal for dropouts is 7.0%. The school scores are as follows:

2000 Attendance 93.2 %	Dropout 8.5%; number of dropouts 7
2001 Attendance 92.1%	Dropout 2.8%; number of dropouts 3
2002 Attendance 92.5%	Dropout 3.2%; number of dropouts 3

### Principle Five: Staffing

School staffing resources are adequate; staff is competent, caring, and aligned to meet stated goals.

Many of Sicily Island’s teachers fill multiple roles. Mr. Shavers, for example, coaches after-school sports, but he also teaches social studies to all four grades, advises 10 students, and maintains the small school library. Additionally, he shares responsibility for school technology with another staff member. A key player in the school trips, Coach Shavers puts in countless hours beyond the regular school day.

Currently, Sicily Island has nine full-time staff members. Most of them have equally demanding and diverse schedules as Coach Shavers. Additionally, a full-time principal and several district employees work in multiple schools part-time. The core staff teaches the following subjects: family and consumer sciences, technology and business, agricultural sciences, English, social studies, mathematics, special education, physics, and physical sciences. The special education teacher currently works with five students. Part-time staff includes a school nurse, a gifted and talented teacher who currently works with two students, and the Spanish teacher. At present, Sicily Island does not

have teachers or offer programs for music, art, library, or physical education. The staff compensates by offering opportunities for art within other classes. For example, students design and assemble all the bulletin boards in the school. A part-time staff member shared with another district school offers physical education biannually. Several after-school programs offer musical experiences, but students wishing to learn an instrument must take private lessons. All staff members participate in after-school clubs or coach sports.

### Principle Six: Facilities

Facilities are clean, safe, orderly and well equipped to support rigorous academic goals, co-curricular activities, and community connectedness.

The high school building sits squat and square with a central entrance and square-shaped classrooms on both sides of a wide central hallway. Two staircases reach the second floor, which has a similar floor plan. Boys and girls have separate stairwells and lockers at the top and bottom of the stairs. This system of separation is a long-standing “tradition” at Sicily Island and both staff and students seem comfortable with it. The building has adequate space for classes and small group work for the current student body. Adjacent to the teachers room is a large "project room" used by both staff and students. The room contains several computers, a multimedia set up, and a wall of bookcases with professional books, curricular documents, and binders holding the interdisciplinary units studied.

The facility is well-maintained, painted, and generally orderly inside. Outside are playing fields to the side and several other buildings, which are shared with the elementary school. Both schools share a freestanding gymnasium and a food service facility. The high school also has a small freestanding agriculture program building.

Technology has played an important role in the school in recent years. A large federal technology grant helped the school to acquire sufficient new technology and the professional development to accompany it. The school is

networked and has high speed Internet access. The district has systems for internal communications and recordkeeping. Multimedia projection equipment is available and students do not have to compete to get access to the tools available. The small library has a computerized system. Technology tools are integrated into many classes and students are expected to use them to produce final papers, PowerPoint presentations, and reports. Spanish is available through distance learning and once a week face-to-face sessions with a Spanish teacher who works with students in Spanish I and II.

### Principle Seven: Leadership

School leaders provide competent and knowledgeable management that supports teaching and learning at high levels and encourages community connectedness.

Discipline does not seem to be an issue at the school. The building is orderly; students are respectful at all times, both in and outside of classes. From interviewing students, one gets the impression that rules are important and enforced. There is a very strict dress code for example; no shorts are allowed although the climate is warm most of the year. Teachers refer to the community as the “Bible Belt” and note that it is a conservative protestant community. The dress code and discipline policies are supported by the parents and community and have been longstanding at Sicily Island.

The students could not remember the last time a student was suspended. "Maybe last year?" was one response. Detention is a more common form of discipline. Students given detention need to arrive at school an hour prior to classes, by 7:00 a.m., and are expected to do schoolwork in the hallway. When asked, "What if a student doesn't show up?" the students expressed shock and said that had never happened as far as they knew.

Mrs. Marguerite Krause has been principal for just one year. She attended the school as a child and taught there for 28 years. She is a Sicily Island native and current resident. Her children all graduated from the school. Mrs. Krause brings to the position an intimate knowledge of the school, students,

families, and community. As a teacher herself, she believes in both empowering teachers and in supporting them. She hopes to return to teaching science on a limited basis once she becomes more familiar with the principal role.

Mrs. Krause sees ensuring all students leave Sicily Island with a clearly identified next step as her primary role. Additionally, she wants all children to leave having maximized their own abilities, feeling good about their strengths, and knowing how to compensate for their weaknesses. She aims to do this by supporting the teachers to do all they can to individualize and meet student needs.

Mrs. Krause has spent the year getting a handle on being a principal. She reported that very few changes have taken place, yet, while she figures it all out. Understanding the budget and accessing resources for her school are a big priority. Mrs. Krause claims that almost all budget decisions are made at the district level and that she has little local control over resources. She hopes to find funds to improve class offerings while retaining her teachers and perhaps securing additional part-time staff members. Supporting professional development is a priority for her as is finding the time for her staff to work together. Mrs. Krause thinks the best way to make a case for all this is to appeal to the superintendent, clearly the decision-maker.

Superintendent Ron Lofton was previously a teacher at Sicily Island. His children attended the school and he lives in the community, so he is a strong supporter of Sicily Island High School and considers it a special place. He remarked, "I wish I could get the teachers in my other schools to take ownership of the whole child the way they do here at Sicily Island."

## ■ The Ongoing Challenges and Opportunities

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### Challenge One: Keeping School

Sicily Island has proven resilient in light of adversity by maximizing the advantages of size to meet student needs. However, maintaining such a small high school will be an ongoing challenge, and will require creativity and skill in terms of structure and budget.

### Challenge Two: Showing Improvement

The school's efforts at individualization are notable and the caring and value placed on all students is exemplary. This will be tested, however, by the state testing system. Such small cohorts make showing improvement an increasingly difficult challenge year to year. While the school may actually be doing an excellent job with each student, the school still may not reach its annual growth target and may eventually reach school improvement status. Maintaining public support at this point will be vital and challenging as well.

### Challenge Three: Expanding Curriculum

The school will need to review enrollment annually and respond creatively to staffing and class offerings as the enrollment changes. It may well consider expanding its distance learning offerings and other ways to enrich and expand the curriculum.

### Challenge Four: Connecting to Community

The school could benefit from reaching out to the wider community in a concerted and comprehensive way. The community could bring needed enrichment into the curriculum, tackle strategic planning issues with the staff, and generally bring more people power to support and improve the school, thus ensuring its future.

## ■ The Policy Implications

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Sicily Island could benefit from policy changes on both the local and the state levels. Among recommended changes on the local level are the following:

1. Develop district level policies to support increased site-based management. This would allow more direct responsibility for funds to be placed in the hands of the principal and staff. It would provide more flexibility to respond to ever-present enrollment changes and staffing issues. Sicily Island now looks to the benevolence of the superintendent to “look out” for the school; and since the current superintendent is a community member, Sicily Island has fared well. This may not always be the case. Local hiring of staff by the current staff would also be an advantage. Staff hiring is currently handled district wide, with limited local involvement.
2. Create a local school board in addition to a district board. A local board would make decisions with only the benefit of Sicily Island in mind and could champion community involvement and support school improvement.
3. Develop local policies supporting youth voice. These policies could address student governance, establish a student council and perhaps lead to the election of a student school board member.

On a state level, two policy issues are of primary importance to address.

1. Louisiana needs to develop a small school review system, which would take into account both additional data and multi-year data for small schools.
2. The issue of teacher compensation in poorer parishes must also be reviewed by the state. Simply put, higher pay in richer communities results in more experienced, better qualified teachers leaving poorer parishes to teach elsewhere. This often results in the most needy students being taught by the least qualified and most inexperienced staff. While Sicily Island’s current staff has remained relatively stable over the years, retirements and other factors

will shortly put the school in competition with other districts and states to fill vacancies. Low pay will be a disincentive, even for locals who might wish to remain and teach in the community.

The staff at Sicily Island indicated that they would feel rewarded for their long hours and extra work by a small bonus given to the school or to teachers for successful results on the state testing system. These poorly paid teachers would be delighted to receive a \$500 bonus each, should their school meet its testing growth target. This would only cost \$4,500, and in Sicily Island's case, would help to ensure these teachers stick with what is a difficult job. Alternatively, policies supporting a school-wide bonus would also be beneficial, especially if the local staff could decide together on how the bonus would be expended.

## ■ Researcher's Afterthought

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Sicily Island was a delightful school to visit. I felt humbled by the dedication and tireless effort put out by the staff. The warmth and camaraderie were evident and the spirit of the school shone, even though the day I visited it poured with rain all day. The student body was relaxed and well-behaved; the school was a safe-haven and caring place for all students. The school was doing the best it could with the resources they have and maximizing the strengths of its small size with individual attention to each child. Nevertheless, I left with worries about the school and its future in the era of high-stakes testing and declining enrollment. I think it is essential the staff and principal make efforts to engage the wider community. Only broad community support and involvement will sustain the school through what may be difficult times ahead.

I was able to meet individually with several parents. One had chosen to send her son to a larger private school after freshmen year. She made this choice because she wanted to offer him more opportunities and course offerings. This child asked to return to Sicily Island as a junior, which he did. He graduated last year and has gone on to a four-year college. He wished to return because he felt cared for and respected by the teachers at Sicily Island. He knew they were going to hold him accountable. He felt he had an important place in the school and, on reflection, found it was the best setting for him to learn and grow.

Another parent felt the greatest current disadvantage of a Sicily Island education was the lack of higher-level mathematics courses. She felt the lack of a calculus course really disadvantaged the students when they went on to college. The principal acknowledged the limitation. However, they have tracked the students post-graduation, and most have done well in college and caught up. As one student said, "We know because of where we are from we will need to try harder when we get to college."

I felt a genuine sense of a staff doing the best it could with what was available. They know their school has weaknesses. They also know the disadvantages are due to size and finances. The disadvantages of size they have countered by stressing the advantage of small size to a large degree, but the financial disadvantage they have little power to change.