

# Early Incremental Improvements Seen in New Orleans Schools

## NEWLY-INSTALLED SYNERGISTIC LABS SHOWING POSITIVE RESULTS

New Orleans Public School officials and teachers knew the facts: their district was low performing, so low that the state instituted a corrective action program that could ultimately lead to school closures if deficiencies went uncorrected and test scores didn't improve.

What could be done for the district's 67,000 students to reverse the spiraling trend of poor academic achievement and a high dropout rate?

"Our strategy to keep high school students in school is to introduce them to success in the ninth grade," said Science Specialist Dana Gonzalez, who supervises all aspects of the district's science efforts including teacher professional development, curriculum, and testing.

Despite hurdles such as 80 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunches and high teacher turnover, the strategy is beginning to work, and student enthusiasm is starting to pick up, especially in labs where Pitsco's Synergistic Systems science has been implemented. Standards-based science content is delivered through multimedia software and hands-on equipment many New Orleans students have never seen – let alone used.

"Out-of-the-box strategies are needed to prevent a lot of our students from falling further and further behind academically," Gonzalez said. "Difficulties just seem to snowball."

Already, the addition of "out-of-the-box" Synergistic Systems as core science at the ninth-grade level is paying dividends. Gonzalez is encouraged by student engagement and improved scores on last spring's Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS).

At the 15 high schools where Synergistic has been implemented, ITBS science subscores were more than 19 percent higher for Synergistic students than for non-Synergistic students, on average. At four of the schools, Synergistic students outperformed the others by at least 38 percent.

"All the materials are right there for the students to use, and they work cooperatively in pairs, helping them to better understand the content," Gonzalez said. "The teacher serves as a mentor to provide additional explanation to supplement the Synergistic training."

With such a high number of New Orleans students below the poverty line, the computers and hands-on equipment in Synergistic are empowering and help build student confidence.

"Computers are novel to some of the kids," Gonzalez said. "And the hands-on equipment – this may be the first time they're seeing some of it. At first they find it challenging and intimidating, but once they're taught how to use the equipment, they do very well."

High teacher turnover always presents a challenge, but Synergistic curriculum mitigates the impact because it is student-centered and all-inclusive, requiring only a well-organized teacher with strong management skills and an understanding of the process.

"The teacher isn't the main focus," Gonzalez said. "A lot of problems that can defeat student performance on standardized testing have been addressed in the Pitsco curriculum."

McMain Secondary School Science Instructor Audra Reyes said she liked the system immediately because the students worked together in pairs.

"Kids prefer to work together to solve problems," she said. "They develop their critical thinking skills that way. It isn't always that they get the answer right but how they arrive at the answer that's most important."

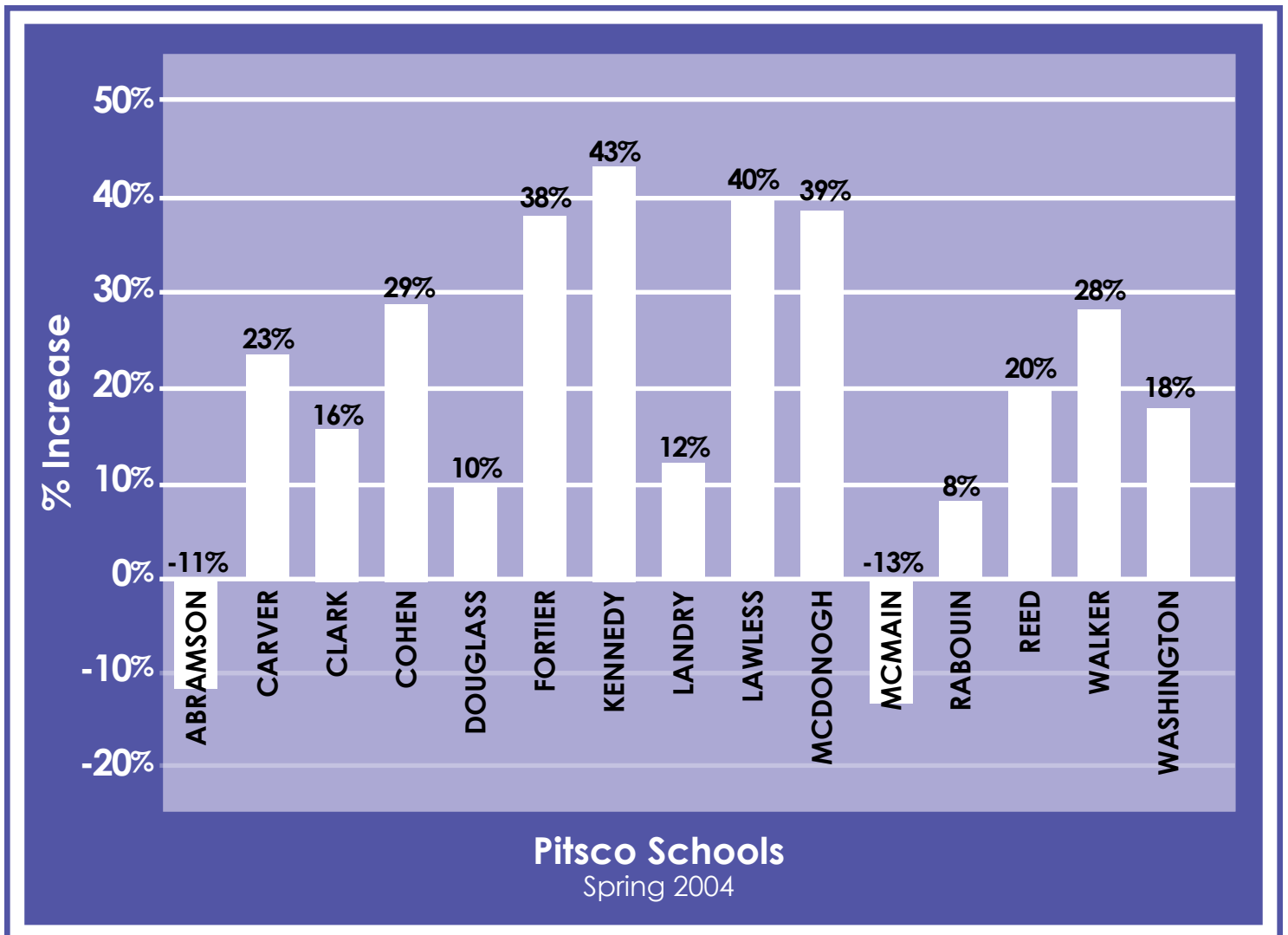
Gonzalez, Reyes, and others in the district know the task ahead is daunting, but recent improvements in test scores confirm that one step at a time, one program at a time, they can make a positive and lasting difference.

# Synergistic Systems

## New Orleans Public Schools report

### ENGLISH, MATH, SCIENCE SCORES SHOW MARKED IMPROVEMENT

The chart below represents test scores for 9th-grade New Orleans students on the spring 2004 Iowa Science Subtest. The chart depicts how students who attended the Synergistic Systems class compare to non-Synergistic students at the same school. The results are reported as a percentage higher or lower than the scores of non-Synergistic students. Results reported by the NOPS.



From the NOPS Pitsco 9th Grade IOWA Science Subscores results report: "The Pitsco curriculum was installed in schools listed in the graph attached at the beginning of the second semester in the spring of 2004. Ninth grade IOWA Science Subscores for Pitsco students were compared to the scores of 9th grade students not taking Pitsco Physical Science in the same school. Students not enrolled in Pitsco Physical Science were enrolled in either physical or general science at some time during the 2003-2004 school year. Most schools showed a significant increase for Pitsco students on the IOWA Science Subscores compared to non-Pitsco students with the exception of Abramson and McMain. Abramson included a significant number of special education children in their Pitsco program. McMain Pitsco students were compared to gifted students in the same school taking gifted physical science."