

# The State of Public Education in New Orleans

2008 REPORT



**A report prepared by:**

The Scott S. Cowen Institute  
for Public Education Initiatives  
at Tulane University

**In partnership with:**

The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation  
The New Orleans City Council Education Committee

## Executive Summary

**Hurricane Katrina's landfall on August 29, 2005, and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans, presented the New Orleans public school system with both tragedy and opportunity.** While no one would have desired

such damage and disruption to the lives of students, parents, teachers, and staff, the storm offered the people of New Orleans a rare opportunity to remake one of the nation's lowest-performing public school systems. Prior to Katrina, the community's investment in its public schools was low. Parental and community involvement was minimal, test scores were among the nation's worst, and facilities had long been neglected.

**Before Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) operated 127 schools that enrolled over 65,000 students. A vastly different system has emerged since the storm:**

- In November 2005, the legislature expanded the state's Recovery School District (RSD) to take control of over 100 OPSB schools performing below the state average.
- The RSD reopened schools initially only as charters, schools run by non-profits that receive public money and provide free education.
- Also in November 2005, the first OPSB-run school reopened. A number of OPSB charter schools opened soon after.
- In the spring of 2006, the RSD opened its first district-run schools.
- In all cases, opening schools in the 2005-06 school year after Katrina was a difficult and chaotic ordeal.

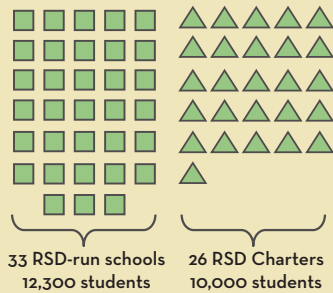
**As a result, the public education landscape in New Orleans has several new and, in some cases, unique features:**

- Eighty public schools in New Orleans are run by 29 different operators, including the OPSB, the RSD, and 27 charter school operators.
- Fifty-seven percent of public school students now attend charter schools, more than any other urban school district in the country.
- In most cases, parents now have the choice to send their children to any public school in New Orleans where they can gain admission, regardless of where they live.

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) & Louisiana Department of Education  
 State Superintendent: Paul Pastorek  
**80 Schools - 32,900 Students**

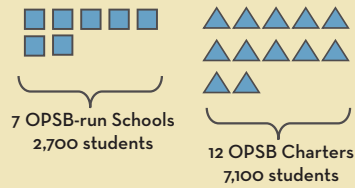


Recovery School District  
 Superintendent: Paul Vallas  
 59 Schools



BESE  
 Charters  
 2 Schools  
 2 BESE Charters  
 800 students

Orleans Parish School Board  
 Superintendent: Darryl Kilbert  
 19 Schools



Data from February 2008

Though the system of schools has experienced radical change, the context in which it operates remains similar to before Katrina, and new challenges have emerged:

- Public school students in New Orleans are overwhelmingly poor. Eighty-three percent of students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunches compared to 63 percent statewide.
- New Orleans' overall population is approximately 63 percent minority, while public school students are nearly 95 percent minority—primarily African-American.
- Across the systems, but especially in the RSD-run and RSD charter schools, the majority of students are well below grade level.
- Public schools have a high percentage of special education students, many of whom have not been evaluated.
- Many students have unaddressed mental health needs due to their experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina.

During the previous school year, public schools faced a number of challenges as they tried to reopen and serve their students:

- School buildings, severely damaged by Katrina and years of neglect, were in disrepair and had few functioning bathrooms or kitchens.
- Most schools did not have adequate supplies of books, classroom equipment, and technology.
- A persistent teacher shortage, particularly in RSD-run schools, led to large classes and instability for students.
- RSD-run schools had significant problems with basic security and school discipline.
- Differences in school quality that existed before the storm were further highlighted after Katrina by the state's decision to create separate districts for high- and low-performing schools.

More people agree that public schools are better compared to last year and to before Katrina

I think public schools are better this year vs. last year

I think public schools are better now than they were before Katrina



Note: For comparison purposes, student responses were removed

## Successes:

The 2007-08 school year began more smoothly than the previous year. We have identified the following as successes achieved since the end of last school year:

- 1) Strong new leadership has emerged at the state and local levels.** Noted school reformer Paul Vallas was recruited by the new state Superintendent of Education, Paul Pastorek, to lead the RSD. The experienced teams they have put in place have improved RSD operations and financial controls and created a sense of momentum and urgency. In addition, more charter schools now have strong leaders and effective board members. Finally, under Superintendent Darryl Kilbert, the OPSB received its first clean audit in four years.
- 2) School buildings have been brought up to basic standards and have significantly more supplies.** In the RSD, whose schools had the most storm-damaged buildings, most bathrooms and kitchens were repaired over the summer. In addition, a number of modular classrooms were built to ensure sufficient capacity. Though challenges remain, students and teachers across the systems note improved facilities and better access to supplies and technology.
- 3) A sufficient number of teachers were hired for the 2007-08 school year.** The RSD and many charter schools worked with several nonprofits to recruit and hire a record number of teachers over the summer. This effort, combined with lower-than-expected student enrollment, allowed schools to keep their class sizes close to 20 students during the current school year.
- 4) The community is much more involved in schools than before Katrina.** Teachers and school leaders from across operators routinely note that community involvement in schools is at an all-time high. Charter schools especially are benefiting from diverse groups of New Orleans residents that have become charter board members.
- 5) Overall, there is a sense among students, teachers, school leaders, and community members that there have been significant improvements in most schools since last school year.** Though still a problem, discipline in RSD-run schools has improved. Students across school operators note that teachers care more, there is more of everything from art supplies to extracurricular activities, and they feel safer at school. Though these improvements are relative to the low baseline of last year, they are nonetheless noticeable and significant.

## Challenges:

Though there have been many successes this school year, challenges remain. We have identified the following as the most pressing challenges facing public schools:

- 1) Many teachers do not have the skills or support they need to teach a diverse student population with very high needs.** In RSD-run schools, 60 percent of teachers have less than two years of teaching experience. In the same schools, 85 percent of students are two or more years below grade level. With many inexperienced teachers and students with significant academic challenges, more support is needed to ensure that school staff can meet the needs of students. Though less extreme, these problems extend to other school operators as well.
- 2) Current levels of school spending cannot be sustained. Both the RSD and the OPSB are spending more per student than they will be able to receive from regular per-pupil funding in the coming years.** In the OPSB, some of this extra money is funding one-time recovery costs. In the RSD, operating funds are being spent on one-time capital costs while the district waits for federal reimbursements. The RSD acknowledges, however, that it cannot maintain certain initiatives that are paid for with one-time revenues, including: low student-teacher ratios, new technology, and extended day and summer school programs.
- 3) Special education and mental health services are severely lacking.** Teachers and principals routinely note that they do not have adequate funds or expertise to serve special education students. In addition, most teachers and principals also say that mental health services for students are inadequate, especially given the stress caused by Hurricane Katrina.
- 4) There is poor cooperation among schools and districts.** Significant tension exists between charter schools and their districts, between charter and traditional schools, and directly between the two districts. Tensions commonly arise over access to resources, student recruitment, buildings, and service provision. This situation prevents opportunities for cooperation where shared services could solve common problems.
- 5) There is a lack of timely and accessible school information for parents, students, and the public.** Parents rank information about school options very low in this year's survey. In addition, without the ability to track students across the city's system of schools, it is impossible to know how parents and students are using school choice.

## Conclusion:

**While many challenges remain, promising results can be seen.** Other troubled school districts across the country have been able to address significant shortcomings in their public schools. These efforts required dedication, strong leadership, and sustained funding. Several of these systems saw strong results in student performance only after many years. However, early indicators of success should be observed. These include parent and teacher perceptions of improvement, increased student engagement and attendance, and some incremental improvements in test scores. So far we are able to observe that teachers, parents, and students feel that the public schools in New Orleans are improving. **That is a definite step in the right direction.**

*The 2008 State of Public Education in  
New Orleans report was prepared by:*

**The Scott S. Cowen Institute for  
Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University**

The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, founded in March 2007, operates as an action-oriented think-tank that actively addresses the issues impeding student achievement by designing and advancing innovative, high-impact policies and programs. It also serves as a clearinghouse for charter and traditional public schools in Orleans Parish to directly access the myriad of experts and resources available at Tulane.

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:**

---

**The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation**

The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation (GNOEF), a nonprofit organization of business, education, civic, and political leaders, was formed in March 1998 in response to the city's need to reform its failing public schools. The purpose of GNOEF is to ensure a high-quality education for every child in the five-parish region of New Orleans with a primary focus on Orleans Parish.

**The New Orleans City Council Education Committee**

The New Orleans City Council Education Committee seeks to offer assistance and input to local agencies and school districts to maximize the quality of public education throughout Orleans Parish.



**Scott S. Cowen Institute for  
Public Education Initiatives**

Tulane University  
200 Broadway Street, Suite 108  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
(504) 274-3690  
education.tulane.edu



**Greater New Orleans  
Education Foundation**

1515 Poydras Street, Suite 1880  
New Orleans, LA 70112  
(504) 593-9100  
www.gnoef.org



**New Orleans City Council  
Education Committee**

City Hall, Room 2W20  
1300 Perdido Street  
New Orleans, LA 70112  
(504) 658-1040  
www.nocitycouncil.com