

The State of Public Education in New Orleans

2010 Report



Executive Summary



In the nearly five years since Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, a fundamentally different public education system has emerged.

The *2010 State of Public Education in New Orleans* report provides information about how well the current system of schools is progressing based on available quantitative data, interviews with school leaders and education stakeholders, and comprehensive surveys of New Orleans voters and public school parents. The report also offers a number of successes that schools have achieved as well as key challenges that still face public education in New Orleans.

System Overview

The leadership of public schools in New Orleans is currently divided between the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), and a number of non-profit charter school operators.

- In the 2009-2010 school year there are 88 public schools open in New Orleans, including 37 traditional schools and 51 charter schools. The majority of public school students, 61 percent, are enrolled in charters.
- Over 90 percent of public school students in New Orleans are African American. The number of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch in New Orleans was 82 percent in October 2009, well above the Louisiana average of 66 percent and the national average of 41 percent.
- The Cowen Institute's 2009 poll of voters and parents revealed general support for the major post-Katrina education reforms in New Orleans, including the state takeover of public schools in New Orleans and the expansion of charter schools.

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The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action-oriented think tank creating and advancing solutions to the issues impeding student achievement in New Orleans and beyond. Areas of concentration include Applied Research, Public Policy, University-Based Initiatives, and College Readiness Programs. Additional information can be found online at <http://education.tulane.edu>.

Operations and Administration

Though school operations were often chaotic in the first few years after Katrina, each school year since the storm has brought further stability to the daily operations of both traditional and charter schools in New Orleans. However, significant operational and administrative challenges remain.

School Facilities

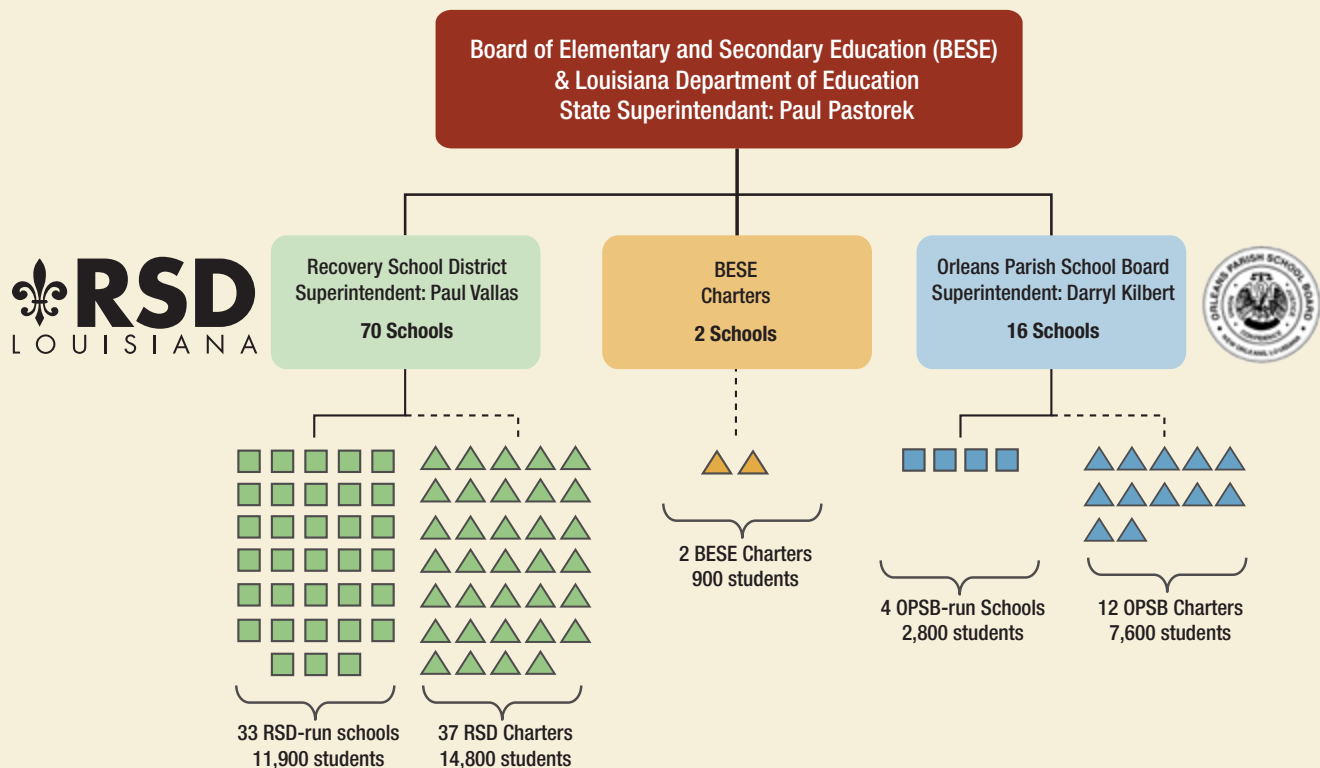
- The quality of school facilities was cited as a major challenge by the vast majority of the public school leaders in New Orleans interviewed by the Cowen Institute.
- Significant activity is underway in school facility planning and construction. The School Facilities Master Plan, approved in November 2008, will spend \$700 million renovating and rebuilding campuses during the fully-financed first phase of the plan. The remaining phases are estimated to cost approximately \$1 billion and remain unfinanced.

School Finances

- School financing for operations is another major challenge cited by charter and traditional school leaders, district administrators, and school support organizations. Many charter school advocates are concerned about the sustainability of the charter model given the current per-pupil funding available through the state.
- Despite many claims, there is little evidence to date that charters have more resources on average than traditional RSD-run or OPSB-run schools.
- Without more recurring funding or significant operational savings, public schools in New Orleans will face financial problems going forward.

Public School Governance in New Orleans

TOTAL: 88 Schools & 38,000 Students



Source: Louisiana Department of Education, October 2009

School Choice

- All public schools in New Orleans are now open to any student residing in the city without regard to their area of residence or attendance zone (though some schools have other admission requirements).
- In the Cowen Institute's recent poll, both voters and parents strongly supported school choice, agreeing that parents should be able to send their children to any school in the city.
- Most parents also responded that it was easy to register their child for school and that they were able to enroll their child in either their first or second choice school.
- Even so, nearly a third of polled parents said that they tried to enroll their child in their neighborhood school but were unable to.

Transportation

- The high cost of transportation created by a system of choice was cited as a major challenge by RSD charter leaders and administrators in the two school districts.
- The public clearly values choice while also valuing the ability to attend neighborhood schools. If education policymakers can work out a way to balance these two competing preferences, it could free up more money for instruction.

Human Capital

- Unlike the school system before Hurricane Katrina, charter schools hire their employees at the school site level according to their own processes and procedures. In addition, RSD-run school leaders have significant flexibility to make hiring decisions at the school site level.
- When asked whether new teachers are improving education in New Orleans, over half of all voters and over two thirds of parents in the Cowen Institute's poll agreed.

Student Achievement

School leaders, district administrators, and other education stakeholders cite rising student achievement as the main success of public education in New Orleans over the last few years. This improvement is substantial and extends to all school types.

- Many school leaders feel that they are starting to succeed in establishing a positive and disciplined school culture that holds higher expectations for student achievement.
- A lower proportion of schools were considered "Academically Unacceptable" in 2009 versus in 2005, indicating that relatively fewer schools are failing now than were before Hurricane Katrina.
- In terms of performance growth, no single school type has consistently shown the highest growth in performance over the past three years.

Governance

The Recovery School District's entry into New Orleans changed the public school system overnight from a centralized, single-district model of education to a decentralized system of schools.

- The current division of oversight and authority has led to a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of different educational entities in a number of areas.
- In addition, the different organizations within the current governance model do not get along well. For instance, the RSD and OPSB have a very strained relationship.
- The lack of a plan for governance remains a serious challenge for the long-term viability of the school system, making it difficult for schools to plan for the future and for the public to understand where accountability lies for public education services.

Conclusion:

SUCSESSES

- 1 Improved school culture and increased expectations.** School leaders and school support organizations agreed that the culture of public schools in New Orleans is improving. School leaders and teachers are building school environments that are more orderly and set higher expectations for students.
- 2 Stronger focus on improving instruction and student learning.** A number of school leaders and school support organizations expressed that, as schools have begun to stabilize their operations and build more orderly school cultures, there is a renewed focus on the quality of instruction.
- 3 Progress on facilities planning and construction.** Though all of the funding is not yet lined up, the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board have undertaken an ambitious and important effort to rebuild or renovate nearly all of the public school buildings in New Orleans that will be in use over the coming decades.
- 4 Improving relationships between districts and their charter schools.** Though tension remains between the RSD and its charter schools over certain facilities services and vendor contracts, most charter leaders express appreciation for Paul Vallas' support of charter schools. In the OPSB system, the relationship between the OPSB and its charters has begun to improve from a low starting point.
- 5 Sustained leadership at the state, local, and school levels.** Since the summer of 2007, there has been stable leadership in the Recovery School District, New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS), and at the Louisiana Department of Education. Though principal turnover remains high among the RSD-run schools, there has been a general strengthening of school leadership in RSD charters and RSD-run schools.

CHALLENGES

- 1 The quality, maintenance, and control of school facilities.** While important progress is being made on improving school buildings, school leaders cite poor facilities as one of their greatest challenges. Schools also move frequently between buildings and sometimes feel like they have little understanding and voice in the process. A fair and transparent process should be articulated for how schools are chosen to move from one building to another as space opens up and how schools will be prioritized for rebuilding if the RSD receives a large settlement from FEMA.
- 2 Financial sustainability of public education.** The financial sustainability of the current system of schools is a concern of charter school leaders and school district administrators in the RSD and OPSB. In the short term, budgets will be tight and schools will have to look for savings by coordinating more services with other schools. Over the long term, the state and the city will need to finance schools at a more sustainable level.
- 3 Governance of the system of schools.** Governance is a challenge wherever roles and responsibilities are sufficiently unclear that it is hard to ensure that all students have access to a good education. While some confusion about governance was inevitable after the state takeover, an official process must now begin to decide on the future structure of the school system.
- 4 Data access and transparency.** A decentralized system of schools requires access to timely information about schools and districts. At the same time, good governance requires transparency about finances, program effectiveness, building plans, meeting times, and many other areas. While basic information for parents has improved over the past few years, a number of problems remain in the area of data access and transparency.
- 5 The relationship between the RSD and OPSB.** Relations between officials from the RSD and OPSB are frequently strained. This tension is often related to financial issues. These struggles drain resources and foster divisiveness. In the long-term, a new governing structure will hopefully ease some of these tensions by clearly defining and separating the powers of each organization. In the short-term, however, the two districts will need to recommit to working together.