

Transforming an urban school district into one that excels at all levels is no small task. It requires the creation of knowledge to inform that transformation.



A Response to the Institute on Race and Poverty’s “The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity”

May 2010

The Institute on Race and Poverty (IRP) at the University of Minnesota Law School has recently released a report, commissioned by the Loyola Institute for Quality and Equity in Education (IQEE), entitled: “The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity.”¹ The IRP report examines the expansion of public charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans and the racial and income demographics of public schools in Orleans Parish and in the New Orleans region. The report then criticizes the use of charter schools as a method of reform in the post-Katrina period by claiming that charter schools segregate students in New Orleans on the basis of race and income. According to the report, charter schools also use other forms of overt and subtle selection to shape their student bodies. The report instead advocates for policies to desegregate schools by race and income through the use of magnet schools and regional desegregation policies.

Because of the Cowen Institute’s history of conducting applied research on public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, we feel compelled to respond to some of the claims made in the report. While some of the report’s claims and observations are accurate and compelling, we show that many of claims in the report suffer from a lack of historical analysis, rely on shaky (often anecdotal) evidence, selectively exclude evidence that contradict the report’s findings, and in some cases misrepresent the truth.

The Cowen Institute provided its initial response to the IRP and the IQEE on May 4, 2010. On May 5th, the directors of both institutes responded and asked the Cowen Institute to refrain from releasing its response until the report was released. The IRP then released the report on May 20th with a new appendix in which the report’s authors respond to some of the critiques in the unreleased Cowen Institute response. The body of the IRP report was not significantly changed. The response that follows is similar to what we sent originally to the IRP and IQEE on May 4th. However, we have changed it in certain areas to address some of the criticisms made in the IRP report’s appendix.

¹ The report can be accessed here:

http://www.irpumn.org/website/projects/index.php?strWebAction=project_detail&intProjectID=71.





In this response, we take the IRP report's claims in the order in which they are presented in the main body of the text (beginning on page 14). We then explain where we agree with the report and where and why we disagree with other parts. We then evaluate the report's conclusions in light of the evidence it offers and other available evidence.

“Race and Poverty in Metropolitan Schools”

The first section of the report's main body begins by explaining that public schools in New Orleans are largely segregated by race. In 2009, over 90 percent of public school students in New Orleans were African-American and most white students were concentrated in a few selective charter schools authorized by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). By contrast, schools in the suburban parishes near New Orleans² had a higher proportion of white students who were less concentrated in particular schools. The report also shows that the proportion of non-white segregated schools (by the report's measure) has decreased slightly in New Orleans between 2004 and 2009 while increasing slightly in the surrounding parishes (18).³ The report explains that non-white students are much more likely to attend a high-poverty school (measured by the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch) than white students in the New Orleans region. The report cites the national research literature that documents the strong correlation between high-poverty schools and negative outcomes for their students including “low test scores, high dropout rates, low college attendance rates, low earnings later in life, and greater risk of being poor as adults” (24).

This analysis is correct insofar as it accurately reports the racial compositions of public schools in New Orleans and the surrounding region as they are reported by the state. However, it provides little historical analysis about how the racial composition of schools came to be. Like in a number of urban centers in the 1970s and 1980s, many whites in New Orleans left the city's public school system and moved to suburban parishes after school desegregation. As a result, poor and African-American students became more concentrated in New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). Middle and upper-middle class whites and African-Americans who remained in NOPS were concentrated in a small number of selective magnet schools or neighborhood schools in more affluent neighborhoods. Middle and upper-middle class whites and African-Americans were also about

² In this report: Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. Bernard, Plaquemines, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. James Parishes

³ The report uses the following measures for determining if a school is non-white segregated, predominantly white, or integrated: “In this study, non-white segregated schools are defined as schools where the share of blacks, Hispanics or other students of color exceeds 50 percent or as schools with varying combinations of black, Hispanic, and other students of color with a share of white students less than 30 percent. In predominantly white schools, the share of each non-white group is smaller than 10 percent. Any school that is not non-white segregated or predominantly white is considered integrated” (77).





equally represented in the city's large number of private and parochial schools.⁴ This background is important not as a justification of the current situation, but rather in light of some of the claims and recommendations that follow.

The report is incorrect and contradicts itself when it comes to the order in which events took place. In the introduction, the report claims: "The [post-Katrina] reorganization of the city's schools has created a separate but unequal tiered system of schools that steers a minority of students, including virtually all of the city's white students, into a set of selective, higher performing schools and another group, including most of the city's students of color, into a group of lower performing schools" (1). However, the report's own charts in the first section show that the extent of racial segregation in New Orleans schools was already established before Hurricane Katrina, and has actually declined slightly since Katrina (18). While the report would like to ascribe the segregation of schools in New Orleans to the post-Katrina reforms, the reality is that schools were already segregated by race and class before the storm and had been for some time. The post-Katrina changes had little impact on the integration of public schools in New Orleans, and to the extent that they have, it is in the opposite direction from what the report claims.

"A New Governance Structure: The Emergence of Charter Schools"

The report then addresses the education reforms enacted after Hurricane Katrina and the expansion of charter schools in New Orleans. In telling the story, the report misrepresents some of the facts about how reforms were enacted and leaves others out.

The report claims that the Louisiana legislature did not intend, when it voted for Act 35, that New Orleans schools should be opened as charter schools (27). However, in a number of news articles from the period, state officials make it clear that this was a possible, and indeed likely, outcome.⁵ Indeed, from the Recovery School District's (RSD) inception in 2003, chartering was discussed as one of the mechanisms it could use to improve low-performing schools.⁶ As evidence that the Legislature did not intend to have more charters, the report cites that fact that the legislature voted not to raise the state's charter cap (27). However, the charter cap, which was removed in

⁴ In the 2004-2005 school year there were 11,600 black students and 13,145 white students in non-public schools in New Orleans. Louisiana Department of Education, "2004-2005 Annual Financial and Statistical Report," August 2006, p. II-152.

⁵ Laura Maggi, "Panel approves 2 bills allowing school takeover; Scalise plan puts all N.O. classes into state's hands," *Times-Picayune*, November 10, 2005.

Laura Maggi, "State to run Orleans schools; Local board loses authority over 102," *Times-Picayune*, November 23, 2005.

"Picard: State will not rush to reopen schools," Associated Press, November 24, 2005.

⁶ Brian Thevenot, "School takeover plan makes rounds," *Times-Picayune*, April 6, 2003.

"Failing schools need makeover," *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, 14 September 2003.

Mark Waller, "BESE begins to pave way for takeovers," *Times-Picayune*, January 14, 2004.





2009, never applied to Type 5 charter schools, those created from schools taken over by the RSD.⁷ The cap at the time allowed for 42 charter schools and in 2005 there were no more than 20 in the whole state to which the cap applied (i.e., not including Type 5 charters). Thus, the legislature did not need to change the charter cap in order to allow the RSD to open new charter schools.

The IRP report also mentions that approximately \$45 million in federal money was earmarked for charter schools (27), but does not mention the \$445,604,639 that Louisiana as a whole received from the federal government from the Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations (RESTART) Program⁸, of which approximately \$173.5 million went to the RSD and \$22.4 million went to the OPSB.⁹ These funds were largely kept by the districts to support their direct-run schools, and did not go to charter schools. Indeed, in the first two full school years following Katrina, the school districts in New Orleans spent much more on average per pupil than charter schools.

The chart below shows current expenditures by school type in New Orleans for the 2007-2008 school year. OPSB-run schools are excluded from the list below because the OPSB does not report to the state on the finances of its direct-run schools separately from its charters. (However, their per-pupil expenditures were probably similar to RSD-run schools in 2007-2008.) By contrast, RSD charter schools are their own local education agencies (LEAs), and so report their numbers separately to the state. The per pupil expenses number for OPSB charters comes from the individual audited financial reports of the OPSB charter organizations, and not from state numbers.

2007-2008 Current Expenditures per Pupil	
RSD-run Schools	\$20,770
RSD Charter Schools	\$10,449
OPSB Charter Schools	\$9,671
All Charter Schools	\$10,224

Source: Louisiana Department of Education & Charter Audits Reports, 2008

⁷ See 2008 Louisiana R.S. 17:3983 (F) (1). Sarah Carr, “State removes cap on charter schools, *Times-Picayune*, June 30, 2009.

⁸ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/restart/awards.html>

⁹ <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/impactaid/iarso.aspx>





RSD-run schools, a category that includes costs associated with the district’s central office, are spending much more per student than the city’s charter schools, regardless of type. Though state reports show the RSD spending over \$20,000 per student over the 2007-2008 school year, the RSD has estimated that, once it removed disaster-related expenditures, that amount was \$12,900 per pupil (or \$16,700 per pupil if \$50 million spent on classroom modernization was included).¹⁰ The most conservative figure is still more than \$2,000 more per pupil than average charter school spending in the same year.¹¹

Thus, while the federal government certainly incentivized and helped to create charter schools in New Orleans following Katrina, the report selectively reports on federal aid for charter schools without mentioning the significant federal aid for districts.

The authors again overemphasize the federal support for charter schools by claiming that the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative “views charters as the main instrument of public school accountability” (28). However, the RTTT regulations and application do not support this claim. In both the proposed and the final rules for RTTT, conversion to a charter school is one of four methods that participating local education agencies can use to turnaround failing schools. While the scoring in the final rule awards points to states that can demonstrate that they “ensur[e] successful conditions for high-performing charter schools,” this criterion is worth 40 points out of a total of 500. Furthermore, the final rule puts a lower priority on charter schools than the proposed rule did.¹²

This section of the report uses selective information in order to create the impression that charters were unfairly imposed on New Orleans, without the full knowledge of the state legislature, by certain state interests and the federal government. The authors also fail to engage with the historically poor performance of public schools in New Orleans, which might help explain why the state and federal government were so keen to remake the governance of the system.

¹⁰ Sarah Carr, “District increases per-pupil spending; \$12,900 per student average is 65% jump from before Katrina,” *Times-Picayune*, March 3, 2008.

¹¹ In their appendix, the IRP authors acknowledge that they are aware of these spending differences but that: “there is a large empirical literature showing that school composition—especially poverty—has much greater effects on student performance than spending (70). However, on the next page of their response, the authors also say, “We are aware of the fact that the racial and economic characteristics of the students in RSD charters and RSD traditional schools are almost identical” (71). Thus, as the authors point out, the poverty composition of RSD charters and non-charters is nearly identical. Poverty is certainly an important factor in school performance, but in this case poverty levels in the two main types of school examined is nearly the same. In this case, the effect of spending should be even more pronounced.

¹² “Race to the Top; Final Rule,” *Federal Register*, November 18, 2009, <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2009/pdf/E9-27426.pdf>.





While the authors may not like charter schools or the way they were implemented in New Orleans, it is important that they base their analysis on the full historical record.

“Consequences of the Rapid Expansion of Charter Schools”

In this section, the authors make a number of strong claims about charter schools in New Orleans based on limited evidence, much of it from outside of Louisiana. These claims fall into three main categories:

- 1) Charter schools shape the characteristics of their student body.
- 2) The system of charter schools is unsustainable and already saturated.
- 3) It will either be too expensive to regulate charter schools or, if poorly regulated, charter schools will have severe financial problems.

1) *Unequal Competition:*

The main accusation that the authors level against charter schools is that they do not compete fairly with traditional schools because they have the ability to shape their student bodies. In the case of the eight selective admissions schools in New Orleans (six of which are charter schools, two of which are OPSB-run traditional schools), this selectivity is explicit and based on academic achievement. Oddly, though the paper accuses these schools of skimming the most able students from the system, their approach is not unlike that of the magnet schools for which the paper later argues. Indeed, selective public schools make up the vast majority of public schools in New Orleans that the authors consider integrated, which is one of the authors’ main goals for public schools.

However, the paper focuses more on the subtle ways in which open admissions RSD charter schools also shape their student body through means like “enrollment processes, discipline and expulsion practices, transportation policies, location decisions, and marketing or recruitment efforts” (29). While these are important issues, the paper offers little systematic evidence of the difference in populations between RSD charters and RSD traditional schools. The main documented evidence that the Cowen Institute has noted for such differences is the difference in the proportion of special education students in RSD charter and traditional schools (charters have a lower proportion, a serious concern),¹³ but the authors only mention this in passing (33, 44).

¹³ Laura Mogg and Michael Schwam-Baird, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report,” *Cowen Institute*, March 2010, p.12.





The main focus of the rest of the paper is on race and income, but both RSD-run and RSD charter schools are nearly identical in the percentage of African-American students they serve and in the proportion of their students that are eligible for free and reduced lunch.¹⁴

Instead of relying on hard data to support its arguments about selectivity, the report relies mostly on literature from other parts of the country and, to some extent, on local observers, who report anecdotes about charter selectivity. Anecdotal evidence is important and can provide a basis for further inquiry. However, anecdotal information is not sufficient to support the argument the IRP authors make later in the paper that all of the difference in performance between RSD-run schools and RSD charters is due to selectivity and to more motivated staff in charter schools that will eventually burn out (49). In their words:

“...selection bias is almost certainly working to increase pass rates in charters, all else equal, compared to traditional schools. In addition, since virtually all charters in New Orleans are less than five years old, burnout is probably not yet a problem, implying that maturation effects are still likely to be working in their favor. What this means is that the relatively modest performance advantages for RSD charters seen in the 2009 data are likely to erode as the charter system matures and if it continues to expand. As the charter school share of enrollments grows, charters will no longer be able to use selection practices to limit enrollments to the most motivated students and parents, and, as charters age, burnout among teachers and staff will become a potential issue. Both of these trends are likely to eliminate the relatively modest performance advantages seen in the current data.”

The claim that staff burnout will reduce the performance of RSD charter schools over time is odd, since a fair amount of charter school research indicates that charter schools actually perform better the longer they are open.¹⁵ It is unclear what evidence the IRP authors have that charter school teachers will burn out more than other teachers and that, as a result, charter performance will decline over time.

Though selectivity could be playing a role in the performance differences, one could just as easily claim that RSD-run schools should outperform RSD charter schools because they have had more money to spend per student. At the same time, some of the difference could be attributable to differences in school quality or other unknown factors. The authors can only speculate that the differences are due to selectivity (or staff burnout).

¹⁴ Laura Mogg and Michael Schwam-Baird, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report,” *Cowen Institute*, March 2010, pp.11-12.

¹⁵ Zimmer et al., “Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition,” Rand Corporation, 2009, pp. 41-45.

“Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes, June 2009, p. 6.





In their appendix, the authors object to our characterization of their use of anecdotal evidence by saying that, “we relied on extensive local evidence to document the presence of many of these [selective] practices in RSD charters, practices which mean that they almost certainly skim some of the most motivated students from public schools” (71). Readers should examine the evidence provided in the text and footnotes for pages 29-33 and decide for themselves. However, in looking through all of these references, the authors of this response see a long list of anecdotal information combined with speculation. To be sure, these anecdotes have some power, and should be taken seriously as starting points for systematic inquiry. But the IRP authors use them to make the entire case.

In some cases, the authors make arguments that are simply untrue. On page 30, they claim that charter schools have great flexibility in choosing the neighborhoods they serve. While this may be the case in other parts of the country, New Orleans represents a unique case due to the uneven redevelopment after Hurricane Katrina and the fact that charter schools are given a building by their district. In interviews with traditional and charter school leaders, the Cowen Institute found that many charter leaders feel at the mercy of the RSD regarding where their schools will be located.¹⁶ Many schools have been moved from building to building when they would have preferred to stay in one place. Most new charters start planning before they know where they will be housed. At the same time, students now attend schools from all over the city, meaning that even if a charter school could choose the neighborhood in which its building is located, it still could not control the neighborhoods where its students live.

Finally, in all of their analysis, the authors never mention in the main text of their report the one major study that actually has looked at student-level data to assess the differences in performance between charter school students and traditional school students (as the IRP authors point out in their appendix, the study is mentioned in a footnote). A study from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that charter school students in Louisiana outperformed their peers in traditional schools after accounting for available student characteristics like eligibility for free and reduced lunch and special education status.¹⁷ The study used data from before and after Katrina and for all of Louisiana, not just New Orleans. Even so, most of the charter schools in Louisiana during the time period the study examined were located in New Orleans.

¹⁶ Laura Mogg and Michael Schwam-Baird, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report,” *Cowen Institute*, March 2010.

¹⁷ “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes, June 2009. For a rigorous review of the strengths and weaknesses of the CREDO study, see: Miron, G. & Applegate, B. (2009). Review of “Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states.” Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit, <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-multiple-choice>.





The authors dismiss the CREDO study in a footnote on the basis that the sample for students in charter schools does not exactly match the population of charter schools in 2007 (though they admit it is close) (86). This should not be surprising, given that the CREDO study used student-level data from the 2000-2001 school year through the 2007-2008 school year. The point of the study is to match as many charter students as possible over that period to similar students in traditional schools. The sample of charter students in the study does not match the statewide population of charter schools in 2007 because the sample spans the seven previous years over which the charter school population was changing. This is hardly an excuse for failing to mention the most rigorous study of charter schools in Louisiana to date, especially when that study happens not to support the IRP study's findings. By contrast, the authors do reference numerous publications that rely on anecdote to support their arguments in the main text of their report.

The Potential for Future Growth:

It is unclear what the authors mean when they say that charter schools have reached a saturation point. Though they have one quote from the executive director of the Louisiana Charter Schools Association to support their claim (34), it is unclear what is meant by saturation in this quote or in their argument. Many charter school networks have expanded and continue to expand by taking over low-performing traditional schools. While the authors may disagree with this strategy, the continued existence of low-performing schools in New Orleans (charter and traditional) means that there is still room for charter school expansion.

In their appendix, the IRP report claims that no charter school in New Orleans has been closed due to poor performance. This is untrue. The New Orleans Free Academy, an RSD charter school, closed in 2009 due to poor performance.¹⁸

The authors' concern with the financial sustainability of charter schools (35) is in keeping with the findings of the Cowen Institute and others, but the RSD and OPSB traditional schools have exactly the same problems.¹⁹ Indeed, as the earlier chart showed, charter schools are arguably doing a better job of spending within their long-term means. Thus, though long-term financial sustainability is an issue, it is one that will affect both traditional and charter schools in New Orleans.

Finally, the IRP authors judge that it is harder to monitor the books of independent charter schools than it is to monitor the finances of government entities (37). While this may be true in

¹⁸ Sarah Carr, "Free Academy board to cede charter; Academic progress inadequate, it says," *The Times-Picayune*, April 22, 2009.

¹⁹ Laura Mogg and Michael Schwam-Baird, "The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report," *Cowen Institute*, March 2010.





some cases, the authors fail to engage with the historical problems that the school system in New Orleans had before Katrina with poor financial management and corruption. Financial controls have been a problem in some charter schools as well, but the expansion of charter schools in New Orleans, and their popularity, is partly a reaction to the history of educational failure and mismanagement in the previous centralized system.

“Race and Poverty by School Sector in the City of New Orleans”

This section of the IRP report section that different types of schools (i.e. OPSB charters, OPSB-run, RSD charters, RSD-run, BESE charters) have different racial make-ups. It also admits that, because public schools in New Orleans are 95 percent non-white and 83 percent low-income, there is not much redistributing of the present student population that can be done to integrate schools. As a result, the authors recommend recruiting middle class white and black students from private schools, creating regional programs to move students across parish lines in order to better integrate schools, and creating magnet programs in the city to attract students from the suburbs and private schools. While all of these proposals are certainly legitimate (even though some may be politically unlikely), the recommendations are particularly strange in the context of the paper’s critique of charter and traditional selective schools. Selective schools in New Orleans (now mostly charters) were the city’s magnet schools before Katrina, and they are the most likely schools to attract non-poor and white students into the public system. While not all magnets need to be selective, or have selective programs, many do and this is how they keep a middle class presence. If private school students are going to start going to public schools, they will go to the selective charter schools first.

“School Performance by Sector”

In this section, the authors use a regression analysis to evaluate the correlation between school types and school demographics on the one hand and school performance on the other. Not surprisingly, the regressions find that the OPSB schools, all of which were not taken over by the state because of their higher performance (and some of which are selective), outperform other schools. The regression also finds that RSD charters statistically outperform RSD-run schools after the effects of student poverty, English language learners, and special education students are held constant.

Though the authors of this response do not have the statistical expertise to assess the validity of all of the methods used in this regression, several problems stand out. The first is that the most rigorous analyses of school performance look at student-level rather than school-level data. This





analysis, which looks only at the level of the school, cannot account for student mobility and many other factors only picked up when the level of analysis is the student.

Secondly, the authors attribute RSD charter school out-performance to selectivity and to the fact that their staff is not yet burned out (49). As discussed earlier, the authors never prove that RSD charter schools do systematically mold their student population. To the extent that some selectivity does exist, the authors cannot prove that selectivity accounts for all of their out-performance. Selectivity could account for none, some, or all of the better performance of RSD charters. The authors have no way of knowing, because they cannot prove that selection is happening systematically, much less the extent to which selectivity might influence their regression model.

The IRP authors object in their appendix that most work done on post-Katrina schools has used school-level data, including reports by the Cowen Institute.²⁰ The Cowen Institute has used school-level data in its reports, but only as descriptive data. We have not used it in regression analysis to make causal inferences because we do not think it would be appropriate. The Cowen Institute has also been quite careful to couch our hypotheses about the descriptive data as hypotheses. For instance, in our 2010 State of Public Education in New Orleans report, we write the following about the difference in performance between RSD charters and RSD traditional schools:

“This [difference] could indicate that RSD charters enrolled students with more academic preparation in the first school years after the storm. This difference may also be due to the chaotic environment that existed in many RSD-run schools right after Katrina. Finally, it could be due to a combination of these and other factors. Determining the relative effects of student recruitment versus school quality and other factors on student achievement would require access to much more information than is available from aggregate school reports.”²¹

As the above paragraph shows, the Cowen Institute has tried to be careful to use the data responsibly and not to ascribe more to it than the data allows. We are certainly open to the possibility that selectivity is playing a role in the performance difference between RSD charters and traditional schools. But we cannot exclude the possibility that school quality, or some other unknown factor, is also playing a role.

²⁰ Of course, this is not true of the Stanford CREDO study, mentioned earlier, which the authors dismiss.

²¹ Laura Mogg and Michael Schwam-Baird, “The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report,” *Cowen Institute*, March 2010, p. 28.





“Conclusion and Policy Recommendations”

In the final section of the IRP report, the authors take stock of their arguments and make policy recommendations. The authors of this response will take each one in turn and respond.

1) *Charter schools cannot be the only institution providing public education and school choice in the city of New Orleans (53).*

The authors give several reasons for this claim:

a) The rapid expansion of charter schools means that students and parents are “forced to choose” a charter school, which is not really a choice.

The logic of this claim is unclear. In a system of traditional schools, which the authors seem to have no problem with, everyone is “forced to choose” a traditional school. In a system of traditional neighborhood schools, every student is “forced to choose” a neighborhood school. Indeed, the authors have never before in their paper held up choice as a positive or negative value in education. It is also unclear why it is important to be able to choose between a charter and a non-charter versus between other types of school characteristics (e.g., large vs. small, progressive vs. traditional, specialized vs. general curriculum). It is unclear why they bring it up now.

b) When charter schools are the exclusive instrument of school choice in segregated urban districts such as New Orleans, school choice produces substantial inequalities among public school students.

This claim is unsubstantiated. As the evidence shows, the segregation of schools in New Orleans preceded Hurricane Katrina and the expansion of charter schools. Indeed, according to the report’s own data, since the storm schools in New Orleans have actually become slightly less segregated. While the authors may wish that public policy was more focused on desegregation, the expansion of charter schools in New Orleans is irrelevant to the issue. The authors fail to show that chartering schools affects school segregation in any way.

c) To the extent that open admissions charter schools outperform district schools, it is because they are subtly selective and their teachers have not yet burned out. If the whole district were chartered, open admissions charters would lose their only advantage (i.e., selection) and hence would be no better than district schools.

The authors employ unproven assumptions when discussing charter school out-performance. They attribute the better performance of RSD charter schools when compared to RSD-run schools to the subtle selectivity of RSD charters and staff motivation. However, the report does not prove that RSD charters are being selective, the extent of their selectivity if it exists, and/or how much





selectivity would drive the differences in performance. The IRP authors also say that RSD charter teachers will burn out as time goes on, negatively affecting charter performance, with essentially no data to prove this claim. They then conclude that as charter schools expand, they will become no better than district schools because they will lose their ability to select and their teachers will burn out. Thus they should not expand. Using unproven assumptions, the authors come to an extremely shaky conclusion about what will happen if charter schools expand.

d) Charter schools are financially unsustainable and prone to financial irregularities.

The financial unsustainability of schools in New Orleans is a problem, but one that currently affects district-run schools and charter schools. Both school types are relying on one-time money (federal funds in the case of the districts; federal and private funds in the case of charter schools) that will eventually dry up. As to financial irregularities, the history of the financial problems of the traditional public school district in New Orleans speaks for itself.

2) *Renew the system's commitment to the RSD traditional public sector (54).*

There is little to argue with when it comes to the need to support and strengthen traditional RSD schools. However, the authors ascribe performance improvements in traditional RSD schools to their inherent quality, while RSD charter improvements are ascribed to selectivity. The authors never mention the fact that RSD-run schools have had more money to spend per pupil on average than RSD charter schools. This difference in resources is better documented than RSD charter school selectivity, yet the authors fail to note it. It cannot be proven that either factor, resources or selectivity, are responsible for the over- or under-performance of either sector, but the authors are nonetheless ascribe causal links to one and ignore the other in their arguments.

3) *Reinvest in magnet schools as an alternative school choice strategy (54).*

New Orleans, like many urban centers, has a long history with magnet schools. Many of the former magnets are today the integrated selective admissions schools that the authors criticize. While the authors do not favor selective magnets, it is unclear whether middle class students will be lured into the system without selective schools or at least selective programs within schools. This makes their critique of the few truly integrated schools in New Orleans, all of them charters and most of them selective, all the more strange.

4) *Make region-wide efforts to expand the choices available to students and parents (56).*





There is nothing wrong with this recommendation other than that it is politically unlikely to occur. But if the authors had stuck with this, they could have forgone their whole critique of charter schools, which could coexist with these sorts of programs.

Conclusion:

The evidence that the authors of the IRP report present to critique post-Katrina education changes in New Orleans is often incorrect, selective, and misleading.

The report says that the post-storm reorganization of public schools in New Orleans “created a separate but unequal tiered system of schools that steers a minority of students, including virtually all of the city’s white students, into a set of selective, higher performing schools and another group, including most of the city’s students of color, into a group of lower performing schools” (1). The notion that the post-storm public education reforms “created” these inequalities is simply untrue. As the authors say elsewhere, this situation existed well before the storm. The post-storm reorganization may not have addressed these issues as much as the authors would like, but it did not create them. Instead, the post-storm reforms have focused on changing the governance and operations of low-performing schools in an effort to improve their performance.

The report attempts to indict charter schools for something for which they bear no responsibility: the racial and economic segregation of public schools in New Orleans. De facto segregation existed in New Orleans public schools before there were charter schools, and there is no evidence that the expansion of charter schools in New Orleans has made it any worse. There are certainly many problems with the current system of public schools in New Orleans, including the unequal distribution of special education students, ill-defined governance, and facilities and financial problems, among others. But the authors ignore these for an argument about racial segregation that has little basis in fact. While the authors may want public policy to deal more directly with the problems of racial segregation, their attack on charter schools is misguided and unsupported by the evidence they present.

