

The New Orleans Index at Five

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Reviewing Key Reforms After Hurricane Katrina

SCHOOL BY SCHOOL: THE TRANSFORMATION OF NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC EDUCATION¹

Andre Perry, University of New Orleans College of Education and Human Development and Capital One-UNO Charter School Network

Michael Schwam-Baird, Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University

Introduction

Education reform in New Orleans is often cited as one of the brighter spots in the city's uneven post-Hurricane Katrina recovery. Of the many public systems that were troubled before the storm (including health care, public housing, criminal justice, and education), the changes in public education following the storm have probably received the most attention and praise.

New Orleans is particularly interesting for the country as a whole because it has implemented a number of reforms citywide that other districts have undertaken on a smaller scale (with the exception of state takeovers). These reforms include:

State takeover. Unlike most school district takeovers, the state of Louisiana took over individual schools in New Orleans based on their school performance while leaving the local school board and its central office intact, albeit with far fewer schools. Though it left a fractured school system, this action allowed the state to take control of the district's low-performing schools without also inheriting the central administration's financial and operational problems.

Charter schools. While charter schools usually educate a small minority of students in other districts, the majority of public school students now attend charter schools in New Orleans. Charter schools are publicly funded, independently managed schools that are authorized in Louisiana by a local district or the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).²

School choice. In most school districts, choice is available only in the case of magnet schools or for students in chronically low-performing schools. By contrast, citywide school choice is nearly universal in New Orleans. As nearly all of the city's attendance zones have been eliminated, parents must now apply to a school or multiple schools in the city in order to gain admission. As a result, almost no one in New Orleans is entitled to a school spot based on where they live.

School staff. Most school districts around the country have collective bargaining agreements with a local teachers union that govern hiring, promotion, and firing while setting pay and work rules, among other conditions of employment. In addition, state laws often codify school staff tenure and seniority protections. Following the state takeover of most public schools in New Orleans, the financially insolvent Orleans

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Parish School Board fired nearly all of its teachers and school staff. Currently, no district or charter school has a collective bargaining agreement. In addition, schools taken over by the state and charter schools have significant flexibility under state law to set hiring, promotion, salary, and work rules.

Student achievement has improved since Hurricane Katrina, by some measures at a faster rate than before the storm. Fewer schools in New Orleans are now considered “academically unacceptable” according to the state’s accountability system. This evidence is widely cited by supporters of post-Katrina school reform. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has visited New Orleans several times and labeled the reforms in New Orleans compelling.³ President Obama also made a highly publicized visit to a charter school in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward.⁴ The Obama administration’s focus on turning around failing schools has made New Orleans, where two-thirds of the schools were considered failing before the storm, a major testing ground for reform.

At the same time, the changes in New Orleans public education face a considerable backlash. Statistically, academic growth has not been correlated with reforms. Detractors accuse the state of taking away local control over schools. This accusation takes on a racial dimension in a majority African American city where over 90 percent of public school students are black. Critics accuse charter schools of taking resources from overburdened traditional schools, of being subtly selective, and of being run by unelected and unaccountable boards. Choice is less controversial, though some critics have claimed that poorer and less educated parents have more trouble navigating the choice system. In addition, without neighborhood attendance zones, some students travel great distances when they would prefer to attend a neighborhood school. The firing of the old system’s teachers and the arrival of many new teachers from outside of the state remains controversial and is derided by the teachers union and the old system’s veterans as unfair.

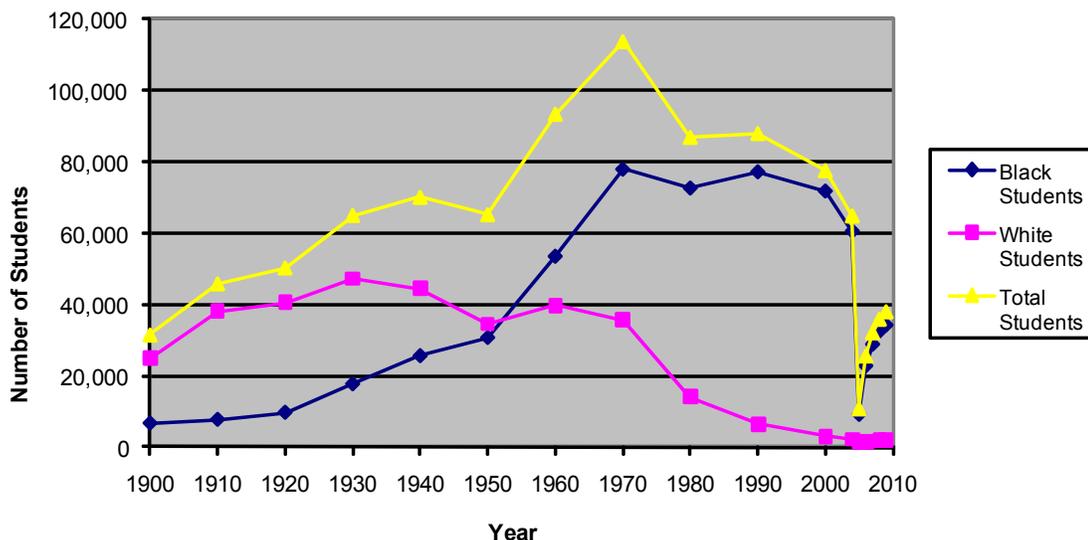
All of these factors have made New Orleans public education a major focus for local and national audiences. This essay will examine the history of New Orleans public schooling in the years before Hurricane Katrina and how public education in the city evolved afterward. It will examine both the advantages of the new system and its political and operational problems. Finally, the essay highlights key areas of concern for education policy in the coming years and makes recommendations for how the system of schools in New Orleans can continue to build on the promising foundation of the post-Katrina years.

New Orleans Public Education before Katrina

Since the end of segregation, New Orleans public schools have faced the same problems affecting many urban school districts: white and middle-class flight to suburban and private schools, a predominantly high-needs population of students, and a decreasing student population (Figure 1). During the 1970s, white enrollment in New Orleans public schools fell by over half, and fell by half again in the following decade. In the same period black enrollment was roughly stable. In 1960–1961 blacks made up 58 percent of the student population, by 1980–1981 black enrollment represented 84 percent of public school students.⁵ In the 2004–2005 school year before Hurricane Katrina, when the population of New Orleans was 68 percent black, the public school population was 94 percent African-American. The school population was also disproportionately poor. Citywide, 38 percent of children lived below the poverty line while 73 percent of New Orleans public school students qualified for free lunch (indicating their families made below 130 percent of the poverty line).⁶

Figure 1. New Orleans Public School Enrollment

number of students by race and year



Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Annual Financial and Statistical Reports (annual).

In addition to serving an increasingly high-needs population, the governance and management of the school system faced a number of problems. Over the decade preceding Hurricane Katrina, the OPSB and the district administration engaged in ineffective, and sometimes illegal, practices while governing and operating the school system. These ongoing problems prevented the school board and the school system administration from addressing the educational requirements of an overwhelmingly high-needs population of students.

A Troubled School District

The OPSB was often a source of political strife and controversy in the years before Hurricane Katrina. The school board was frequently criticized for awarding contracts in ways that hurt the district financially while providing low quality services.⁷ The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the district central office were considered sufficiently corrupt that a 2004 FBI special task force was assigned to investigate.⁸ In 2008, a former school board president pled guilty to accepting \$140,000 in bribes in exchange for supporting the district’s purchases from a particular vendor.⁹

Board members also engaged in public spats amongst themselves and with other governmental entities, community groups, and parents. School board infighting was frequent and public.¹⁰ In one extreme example, board members filed lawsuits against one another after an attempt to fire the superintendent split the board.¹¹ In addition, school board members were often over-involved with the details of the school district administration and were frequently accused of micromanaging superintendents.¹² At least one member of the board, in concert with a strong local political machine, influenced the hiring of principals.¹³

The district administration also faced a host of operational and financial issues in the years preceding Hurricane Katrina. Over a number of years, the OPSB had difficulty balancing its budget, and often found out late in the school year that it would overspend its budget significantly.¹⁴ The system’s central office also experienced significant turnover in its top management. In the decade before Hurricane Katrina hit, a total of eight (three

permanent and five interim) superintendents ran the school system.¹⁵ Between February of 1999 and March of 2005, five different chief financial officers were named in OPSB audits, some with gaps where it is unclear that anyone filled the position.¹⁶

This turmoil may have contributed to mismanagement and fraud in the New Orleans school system’s central office that came to light in the decade before Hurricane Katrina. A 2004 state audit report revealed extensive problems with the payroll system, with estimates that terminated employees were paid over \$3,000,000 in pay and benefits to which they were not entitled. In addition to poor controls, the payroll department had seven managers between October 1999 and July 2003 and had not updated its handbook since 1983. The finance department went through three administrators in the same amount of time and had no handbook or manual.¹⁷ In 2004, 11 employees were indicted for criminal financial offenses against the OPSB.¹⁸

In March 2005, auditors reported that the school system was broke. This led the state to push for an outside firm to take over district finances.¹⁹ Having just fired the last permanent superintendent it had before the storm, Anthony Amato, the OPSB handed its finances over to the private consulting firm Alvarez and Marsal in July 2005.²⁰

Low Student Achievement

Student poverty and the system’s administrative problems were reflected in low school performance (Table 1). In 2005, Orleans Parish ranked 67th out of 68 Louisiana parishes in student achievement. With the exception of a few high-performing, selective-admissions schools, where white and middle class students were clustered, most public schools in the decade before Katrina were low-performing.²¹ In the 2004–2005 school year, 64 percent of public schools in New Orleans were deemed “academically unacceptable” by Louisiana accountability standards, compared to 8 percent of public schools across Louisiana.²² The city’s public schools had a 12th grade drop-out rate of 16.8 percent, with some schools over 30 percent, compared to a state-wide rate of 7.6 percent in the 2004–2005 school year.²³

Table 1. New Orleans Public School Enrollment

By school performance label in 2005

School Performance Score (SPS) Level	# of Schools	Percent of 2005 Schools by Performance Level
Academically Unacceptable (below 60.0)	73	64.0%
One Star (60.0 - 79.9)	23	20.2%
Two Stars (80.0 - 99.9)	7	6.1%
Three Stars (100.0 - 119.9)	7	6.1%
Four Stars (120.0 - 139.9)	2	1.8%
Five Stars (140 and above)	2	1.8%

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2004–05 District Accountability Report

Even so, student achievement in New Orleans rose in the years before Hurricane Katrina, albeit from a very low baseline (Figure 2.1 – 2.3). Passage rates on individual high stakes tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math in the 4th, 8th, and 10th grades generally rose in the three to four years before 2005, but remained well below state-wide averages.²⁴

Figure 2.1 Fourth Grade LEAP

Percent of Students Achieving Basic & Above

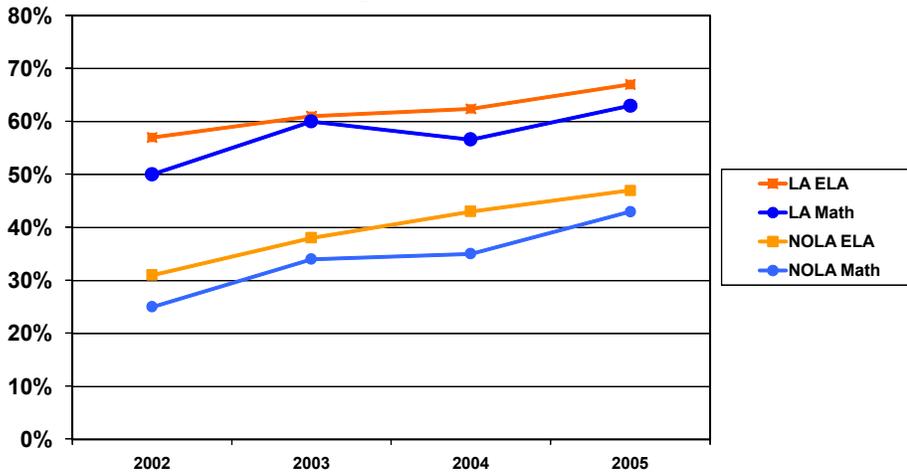


Figure 2.2 Eighth Grade LEAP

Percent of Students Achieving Basic & Above

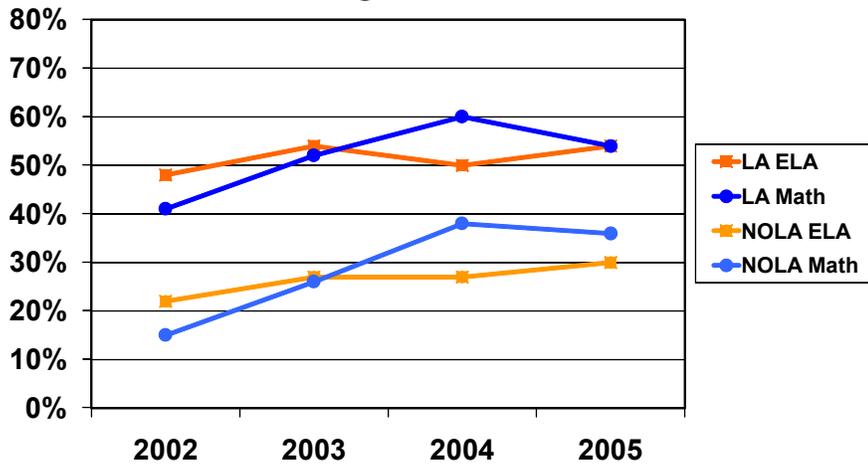
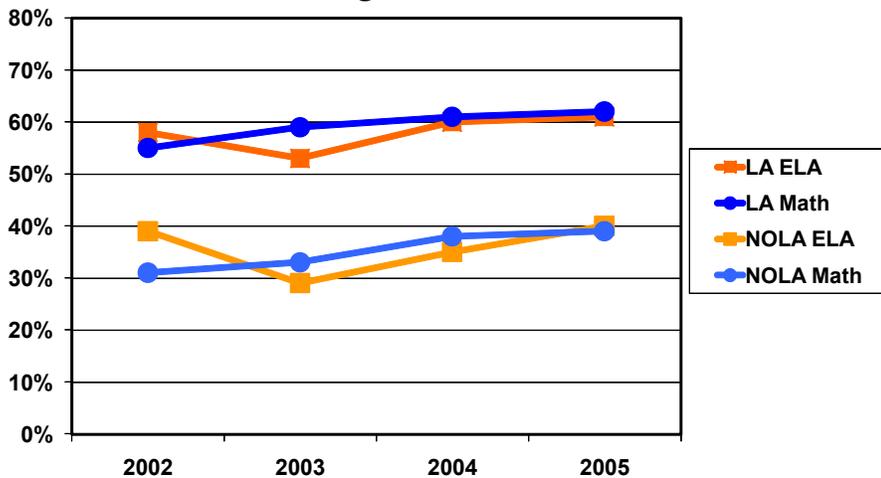


Figure 2.3 Tenth Grade GEE Test

Percent of Students Achieving Basic & Above



Source: Louisiana Department of Education, LEAP Test Results, 2002-2005.

These issues combined to make New Orleans public schools a target for some form of state intervention. In addition to the takeover of school finances in July 2005, a number of other attempts were made over the previous decade by mayors and the legislature to change the structure and governance of the school system in a variety of ways. However, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath helped to determine the ultimate method and scope of that intervention.

Summary of the Post-Katrina Initiatives and Latest Impact

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina expedited education reform in New Orleans. The race to open schools for students who returned to the city and for those families wanting to return was as big an impetus for New Orleans' noted restructuring as any intentional reform strategy. Indeed, many of the enacted reforms existed in some form prior to the storm and their perseverance reflects political commitment to these initiatives. At the same time, the absence of evacuated stakeholders changed the political dynamics that held the prior system together. The financial duress of the school board; the need to open schools immediately; and the destruction of school facilities precipitated many of the reforms that education leaders currently espouse. The rapid expansion of the Recovery School District, the removal of school attendance zones, and the rise of charter schools were arguably convenient solutions to acute needs. In this regard, New Orleans' education recovery could be interpreted as a series of reactions to unfolding events using policies already in place rather than as a process based on pre-established goals.

New Governance and the Expansion of Charter Schools

Contrary to what the name now seems to suggest, the Recovery School District existed prior to the storm as part of a 2003 state constitutional amendment to allow state takeover of repeatedly failing public schools. Schools not meeting adequate yearly progress over a number of years are eligible to be placed within the RSD. As indicated on its website, the RSD's mission is "to provide the supports and interventions necessary to put academically struggling schools on a path toward success."²⁵ Chartering is one of its primary interventions for school recovery. In 2004, Pierre A. Capdau Elementary School became Louisiana's first "takeover" charter school. In return for a five-year charter to run the school, the University of New Orleans committed to increasing the school's performance by at least 20 points.²⁶ Prior to the storm in 2005, four other New Orleans schools were taken over by the state due to low performance and turned over to charter school managers.²⁷

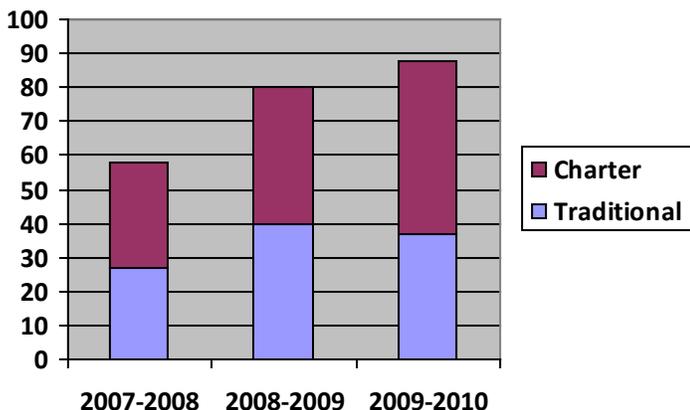
Katrina hit the Gulf Coast only a week into the new school year on August 29, 2005. As a result of the levee failures and the city's evacuation, many of the usual education stakeholders, and many former residents in general, were not present in the subsequent debate about rebuilding public education. In the absence of the usual interest groups, the state Legislature passed Act 35 in November 2005, which dramatically expanded the RSD. Under Act 35, the Louisiana Legislature changed its earlier definition of an academically unacceptable school. The new definition made individual schools eligible for placement in the RSD if their School Performance Score (SPS) was below the state average, as opposed to having an SPS of below 60, which was in the previous law. This new definition only applied to schools in districts that were considered by the law to be in "academic crisis," meaning that the district operated more than 30 academically unacceptable schools or had more than 50 percent of its students in them.²⁸ By setting the cutoff for transfer to the RSD at the state average, policy makers tailored Act 35 to take over the vast majority of schools in New Orleans (the only district in the state that was in academic crisis according to the

law). In addition to management rights, the legislature also granted the RSD authority over the land and buildings occupied by the schools it took over.

In an effort to open more schools after the storm, the OPSB also exercised its rights as a school authorizer to charter numerous non-failing schools. Some of the schools the OPSB chartered were selective magnet schools before the storm. Nevertheless, the OPSB and the RSD opened schools as families returned to the city. The transition to a new choice/charter district also created new challenges. In January of 2007, the RSD placed over 300 children on waiting lists as the state-run schools rushed to open additional facilities and find more teachers.²⁹ Thereafter, school enrollments continued to swell.

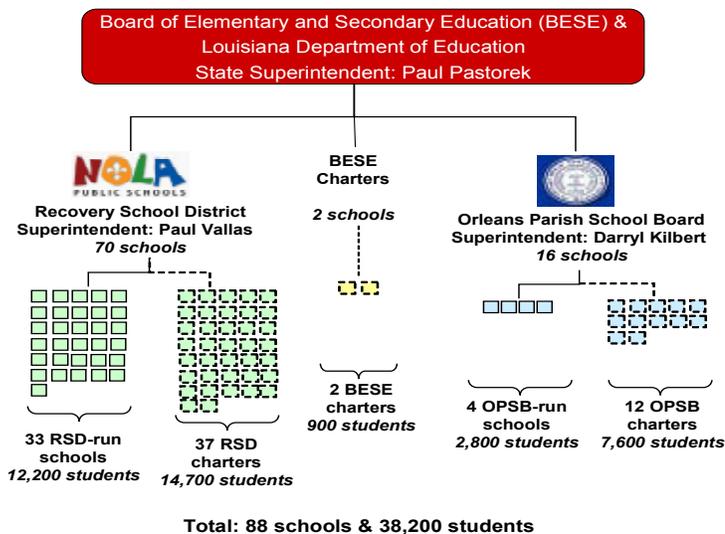
Figure 3. Charter and Traditional Public Schools

New Orleans 2007–2010



The number of charter schools in New Orleans has increased dramatically—from three charter schools in 2004 to 51 in 2010. Currently, 61 percent of all public students attend charter schools, the highest rate of charter attendance in the country (Figure 3). Ninety-five percent of New Orleans public school students are minority, and 83 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In total, public school enrollment is down from its pre-Katrina number of 65,000 students just before Katrina to approximately 38,000 in 2010 (Figure 4). However, the current number of enrollees has been steadily climbing since 2006, when public schools in New Orleans enrolled approximately 25,600 students.³⁰

Figure 4. Governance Structure as of March 2010



Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Student Data: Multiple Statistics, 2009–2010

Under state law, during the fall of 2010, the RSD must recommend to BESE whether or not to return the schools taken over after the storm to the Orleans Parish School Board. This decision is often portrayed as a battle for local control. Advocates for a return to the OPSB want schools back according to the 2010 timetable. Others advocate for a continuation of the current system. Most would like to develop a sustainable local governance structure that facilitates high academic and fiscal performance. However, determining what that structure will look like remains challenging.

Greater School Choice

School choice refers to the range of policies that allow parents to select the school they want their children to attend. The sparse availability of schools immediately after the storm necessitated the removal of attendance zones. In addition, most charter schools were forbidden by law from having an attendance zone. Parents had to apply to the school where they wished to send their children. As schools reopened over the years, the state and district retained school choice, particularly in light of the Recovery School District's goal to charter the most of its schools. Leaders also wanted parents to have choice in a decentralized environment. As a result, New Orleans is the first major city in the United States that can be considered a choice district.

Choice has tradeoffs. In particular, different application processes can create confusion for parents when enrolling their children and difficulties for authorizers when monitoring open-enrollment mandates. In order to address these concerns, the RSD and its charter schools developed a common application process.³¹ However, families apply to each school individually and do not rank their choices. This reduces the ability to predict enrollments and budget appropriately. In addition, if a school has more applicants than seats then a lottery must be employed. Some schools have waiting lists filled with students who do not live near the school. Therefore, families who live within blocks of a school may not have access to it. Moreover, because small, independent schools are less able to take advantage of economies of scale, schools have little buying power to reduce costs. As a result, school leaders have expressed that transportation costs are a major challenge.³²

Emphasis on Teacher Quality and School Leadership

The convergence of storm recovery and comprehensive educational reform influenced how educational leaders decided to reconstruct the school system. In particular, the question of who should teach motivated many of the decisions in the weeks after Katrina's landfall. Teacher quality has long been viewed as one of the most pivotal factors affecting student achievement. Controlling the teachers and staff who work in a school is widely seen as linchpin of school success.

In the months prior to Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Education hired consulting firm Alvarez & Marsal to manage the finances of OPSB. As explained previously, internal and external audits revealed financial mismanagement and extensive overspending. As a result, the OPSB was declared effectively broke in the months before the storm. With unpredictable expectations about the return of the taxpaying public and the unknown number of teachers needed in the months and years after Katrina, the OPSB ascertained that it did not have the fiscal strength to rehire its former employees immediately after the storm. In September of 2005, the board placed all school employees on disaster leave, meaning they would receive no pay or benefits until the schools reopened.³³

In December of 2005, 7500 school district employees were officially terminated, and

because of their varied evacuations, many did not receive official notification.³⁴ This had a large impact on the city’s black middle class; 73 percent of public school teachers were African American in the 2004–2005 school year.³⁵ The United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), the local teachers union, fought vigorously against the firings. However on June 30, 2006, the UTNO collective bargaining agreement with the district expired, and the school board did not vote to renew the contract.³⁶ The union saw its influence significantly diminished.³⁷

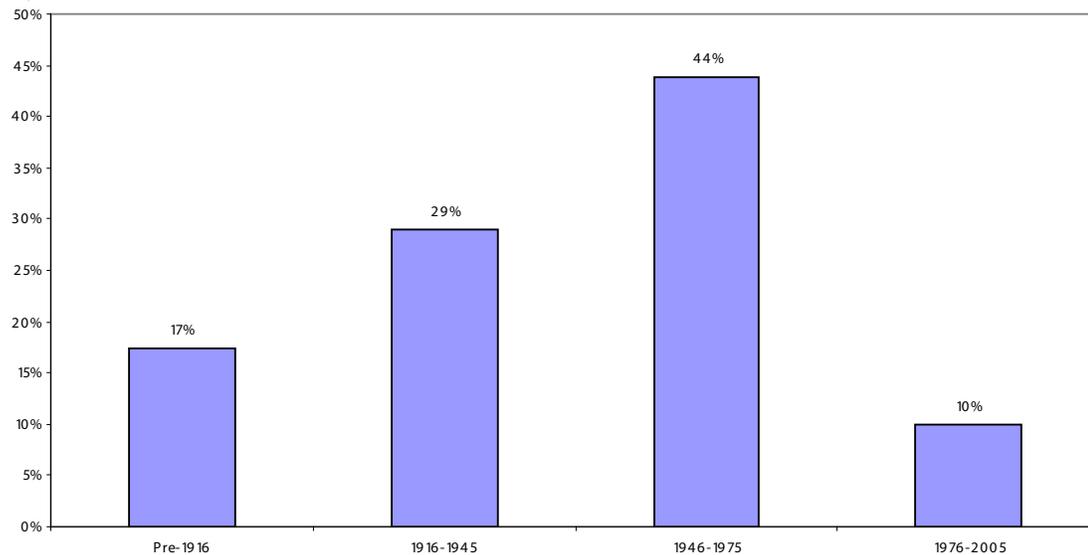
The door was now open for alternative teacher training programs to take root. Non-profit groups and philanthropic organizations that focus on teacher and leadership training emerged or gained significance in the years after the storm. Organizations like Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools established and/or grew existing branches in New Orleans. In addition, schools such as KIPP that align their teacher and leader training programs to the aforementioned organizations also benefited from their presence. These local education providers and national philanthropic groups gained significant traction in the region.

In December 2007, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund, and the Broad Foundation announced their plans to provide several grants for three years to New Schools for New Orleans, New Leaders for New Schools, and Teach for America of Greater New Orleans.³⁸ All of these philanthropic organizations place a strong emphasis on quality teaching and leadership and encourage new pathways to get quality personnel into schools. These philanthropic efforts continue to influence the pipeline of teachers entering public schools in New Orleans.

Modernizing School Facilities

School buildings are integral components of educational programs. Before the storm, New Orleans schools were housed in some of the oldest and most fragile facilities in the country. Most of these facilities were built during the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s, the highest periods of public school enrolments (Figure 5).³⁹

Figure 5. Pre-Katrina New Orleans Public School Buildings
By Year of Construction



Source: Recovery School District, School Facilities Master Plan Building Assessments (2008).

In 2007, State Department of Education Superintendent Paul Pastorek and RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas developed a plan to erect five new schools from existing FEMA settlement dollars. Education leaders' criteria for the five "quick starts" included alignment to the post-Katrina Unified New Orleans Plan and the city's 17 targeted recovery zones.⁴⁰ The quick starts helped inform the framework for a larger initiative to rebuild the school facility infrastructure of the entire city. After an extensive public planning process, the OPSB and the RSD adopted a comprehensive plan to renovate, rebuild, or land bank existing buildings in 2008. The School Facilities Master Plan for New Orleans will cost approximately \$2 billion dollars.

The Master Plan proposes six phases of construction and renovation. A total of \$700 million for Phase I construction is secured by insurance proceeds, FEMA funds, and Community Development Block Grants. However, the funding for the subsequent phases has not been secured.⁴¹

Boost in School Investments

One of the more dramatic differences between the pre-Katrina and post-Katrina public schools is the difference in resources available to schools. In the three years before Hurricane Katrina, the OPSB spent between \$6500 and \$7900 per pupil in total current expenditures (Table 2). Current expenditures captures the amount spent on operating schools while excluding capital costs for major construction and repairs and paying off school board debt.⁴² Between 2002 and 2005, OPSB spending was largely in line with the Louisiana average.

Table 2. Public School Spending

Pre-Katrina

Year	New Orleans Current Expenditures Per Pupil	LA Current Expenditures per Pupil
2002 - 2003	\$6,571	\$6,906
2003 - 2004	\$7,296	\$7,248
2004 - 2005	\$7,893	\$7,630

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Resource Allocation (Revenue/Expenditure Data), 2002-2005.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the federal government committed \$196 million in federal "restart" grants to reopen schools in New Orleans.⁴³ The federal government also provided a smaller amount to help start up new charter schools in New Orleans after the storm and many private foundations and individuals also provided funding. As a result, in the years following Katrina, schools in New Orleans spent much more per-pupil on school operations than the state average (Table 3).

Table 3. Public School Spending

Post-Katrina

Year	New Orleans Current Expenditures Per Pupil	LA Current Expenditures per Pupil
2006 - 2007	\$14,122	\$8,881
2007 - 2008	\$15,557	\$9,966

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Resource Allocation (Revenue/Expenditure Data), 2006-2008

Though buoyed by one-time federal money, school spending in New Orleans will eventually have to return to a level closer to the Louisiana average. As a result, certain programs

may need to be curtailed. Indeed, without more recurring funding or significant operational savings, public schools in New Orleans will face financial problems going forward.

Improved Academic Performance

Public schools in New Orleans have demonstrated sustained academic growth since Hurricane Katrina. When comparing pre-Katrina to post-Katrina performance, analyses of grade-level test scores indicate that New Orleans public schools are generally, though not exclusively, improving at a faster rate since the storm (Table 4).

There are six main high stakes tests in Louisiana that are often cited when making arguments about student achievement: the 4th grade LEAP tests in ELA and Math, the 8th grade LEAP tests in ELA and Math, and the 10th grade Graduate Exit Exams (GEE) in ELA and Math. Though state tests are given in other grades and in other subjects, passing these tests has high stakes for students. If students do not score sufficiently high on these tests, they cannot proceed to the next grade or, in the case of the GEE, graduate from high school. As a result, students and schools expend significant effort to prepare for these particular tests.

The following table shows student proficiency rates on these exams in the three school years before Hurricane Katrina and in the three school years after Hurricane Katrina:⁴⁴

Table 4. Pre- and Post-Katrina Public School Student Achievement in New Orleans

Year	Percent Basic & Above		Year	Percent Basic & Above	
4th Grade ELA			4th Grade Math		
2003	38.0%		2003	34.0%	
2005	47.0%	9.0%	2005	43.0%	9.0%
2007	48.9%		2007	43.4%	
2009	61.0%	12.1%	2009	52.9%	9.5%
	(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	3.1%		(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	0.5%
8th Grade ELA			8th Grade Math		
2003	27.0%		2003	26.0%	
2005	30.0%	3.0%	2005	36.0%	10.0%
2007	38.6%		2007	36.6%	
2009	46.6%	8.0%	2009	44.4%	7.8%
	(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	5.0%		(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	-2.2%
GEE ELA			GEE Math		
2003	29.0%		2003	33.0%	
2005	40.0%	11.0%	2005	39.0%	6.0%
2007	37.3%		2007	43.4%	
2009	48.6%	11.3%	2009	57.8%	14.4%
	(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	0.3%		(Post Katrina) - (Pre Katrina) Growth Rate	8.4%

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, LEAP Test Results, 2003-2009

Significantly, proficiency rates grew in every testing area in the periods before and after Katrina. This indicates that the system was on an upward trend academically even before the storm, and that this general upward trend continued afterwards. The growth rates in the three years after Katrina show that in three out of six tests—4th grade ELA, 8th grade ELA, and GEE Math—the growth rates of public schools have increased significantly. In two out of the six tests—4th grade Math and GEE ELA—the growth rate grew only slightly, by less than one percentage point. In 8th grade Math, the rate of growth has declined since Katrina.

In addition to the higher LEAP passage growth rate, the proportion of academically unacceptable schools has fallen (Table 5). In addition, a higher proportion of schools are now scoring at the one, two, three, and four star levels than before Katrina, indicating that schools are moving up throughout the levels of performance outlined by the state.

Table 5. School Performance Levels

Pre- and post-Katrina

School Performance Level (SPS)	# of Schools	Percent of 2005 Schools by Performance Level	# of Schools	Percent of 2009 Schools by Performance Level
Academically Unacceptable (below 60.0)	73	64.0%	31	41.9%
One Star (60.0 - 79.9)	23	20.2%	22	29.7%
Two Stars (80.0 - 99.9)	7	6.1%	12	16.2%
Three Stars (100.0 - 119.9)	7	6.1%	6	8.1%
Four Stars (120.0 - 139.9)	2	1.8%	2	2.7%
Five Stars (140 and above)	2	1.8%	1	1.4%

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2004–2005 and 2008–2009 District Accountability Reports

Finally, the percentage of students attending an academically unacceptable school has also declined considerably since Katrina (Table 6).

Table 6. Percent of Public School Students in New Orleans

By school performance

School Performance Level (SPS)	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2008	Fall 2009
Academically Satisfactory (60.0 and above)	28%	30%	44%	59%
Academically Unsatisfactory (below 60.0)	69%	67%	30%	34%
No Score Assigned to School	3%	3%	26%	7%

In all, academic performance has been promising since the storm, though a large proportion of schools remain very low-performing, especially high schools. In addition, correlation between academic growth and the major post-storm reforms has not been demonstrated. Changing demographics, the tremendous diversity between school types, and the academic growth of students who relocated to other states all make it difficult to make definitive claims about causation.⁴⁵ Moreover, given that fewer resources will be available to schools in the

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, District Accountability Reports, 2003–2009; Louisiana Department of Education, Student Data: Multiple Statistics, 2003–2009.

coming years, it remains to be seen if the initial academic progress that schools have made can be sustained.

Cautions and Implications for Future Policy and Actions

Governance

Decentralization has its benefits: site-based autonomy, less bureaucracy, and increased accountability. However, highly decentralized systems are less able to take advantage of economies of scale. As a result, vendors can increase the prices of their services. Transportation, food services, and retirement costs quickly absorb large spaces in small schools' budgets.

In addition, coordination and consistency is inherently less likely to occur in a decentralized system. When schools are judged heavily on their test scores in a system of choice, schools have inherent incentives to exclude or remove students with learning and behavior problems. Once students are admitted to schools, some entity needs to ensure that there is a fair system for student retention, discipline, and expulsion. This is necessary to ensure that students have equal access to schools and that schools are judged by the quality of their programs and not the preparation of their students.

Finally, data collection, analysis, and dissemination heighten accountability and fairness for education consumers. However, collecting and analyzing system level data is difficult in a decentralized environment of varying school types with no central governing body. As a result, making informed choices about schools is difficult for families and the community remains confused about how the school system works.

Human Capital

Contracting services to acquire expertise and knowledge is a staple of market-based reforms. Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools provide a tremendous service, but many of their members depart after their short-term commitments. There does not seem to be a long-term strategy to build the capacities of those who are committed to live in the city for years to come.

Facilities

Although local and state officials have secured the funding needed to complete the first phase of the facilities master plan, officials must secure financial support for the other phases of the plan. Much of the plan is still eligible for FEMA reimbursement. Federal, state, and local officials are currently negotiating an unprecedented lump settlement for the dozens of damaged buildings, which is expected to cover the costs of the remaining phases. However, the settlement has yet to come to fruition.

Oversight of facility construction and long term facility management has also been muddled under the current governance structure. Although the state legislature granted the RSD authority to manage school land and buildings, the OPSB still owns the facilities and remains the taxing and bonding authority for Orleans Parish. Typically, the OPSB would have more direct control of the facilities master plan. The current arrangement requires tighter coordination and cooperation between the OPSB, RSD, and other official actors. With nearly \$2 billion dollars at stake, serious disagreements should be expected. Moreover, the lack of a long-term plan to monitor maintenance of a decentralized system may accelerate the deterioration of new facilities.

Finances

One-time federal funding allowed school districts to spend more than their regular per-pupil revenues in order to restart schools after Hurricane Katrina. However, these funds are largely spent. While district-run schools have received most of the federal disaster funding, new charter schools have also benefited from private philanthropy and federal start up grants that may eventually decline or disappear.

In the short term, school budgets will be tight and schools will have to look for savings and try to produce economies of scale by coordinating with other schools. Some charter schools may be forced to add grades more quickly in order to support their programs. If policymakers amend the choice system to allow more neighborhood preferences, this could save money on transportation and help create more neighborhood cohesion around schools. Over the long term, the state and the city will need to finance schools on a more sustainable basis.

Recommendations/Actions to Further Progress

1. **Create a cohesive system of school governance with clear roles and responsibilities.** The rapid decentralization of schools as well as the temporary transfer of certain powers to the Recovery School District created uncertainty as to the appropriate and permanent arrangement for the effective management of schools. As the school system stabilizes, what type of long term governance structure can support the academic gains that have been made, coordinate critical services (enrollment, special education, discipline), and contain rising costs of a highly decentralized system (transportation, food services, facility maintenance)? Governance reform should include a process that encourages input from parents and the broader community.

As the state approaches the 2010 deadline to recommend to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on how (if at all) the Recovery School District will continue working with the schools under its auspices, the OPSB, RSD and BESE should provide a mechanism by which the larger public can help shape a cohesive system of school governance that will sustain desired and effective aspects of the reform.

2. **Create and disseminate annually a system-wide report that measures academic and financial performance of public schools.** For autonomous schools to be successful, the district must make accountability central to school operations and performance. Stakeholders—especially school leaders and parents—benefit from thorough school quality monitoring. In a city such as New Orleans, where the majority of students are in a system of school choice, it is vital for school leaders, parents, and other stakeholders to have access to rich information about the performance of schools.
3. **Continue and strengthen an accountability system that emphasizes college readiness.** The majority of New Orleans schools calibrate their pedagogies, curriculums, and overall educational plans around college readiness. The overwhelming evidence shows the most abundant job opportunities are those that call for college and advanced degrees. In addition, many trades require the same basic math skills as a two-year college degree for the entry level. Whether professional or vocational, careers in the 21st century require the type of curriculum that is presented in the Louisiana Core 4, which is the college preparatory track. An accountability system that expects college entrance should be employed.

4. **Strengthen the School Facilities Master Plan with policies around school closure, takeover, placement, and facility maintenance.** Transparent policies around school closure, school takeover and facility maintenance can maximize the long-term success of the School Facilities Master Plan. These policies should be created prior to the implementation of the master plan.
5. **Reduce rising costs by increasing benefits portability and competition among vendors while developing school co-ops to maximize collective buying power.** The costs of some services can be reduced by “buying in bulk.” Economies of scale are improved in numbers. In particular, the costs and variety of retirement plans, health benefits, transportation, and food services can be contained through co-ops and collective agreements.
6. **Continue to increase the pool of new teachers in the region while developing a strategy to build the long-term employment prospects of native residents through training, recruitment, and professional development programs.** Talented teachers are critical to the success of any system of schools. Sustainable systems require a highly trained, local workforce. Therefore, teacher training programs should facilitate the development and employment of long-term residents if schools are to reduce preparation and recruitment costs. In addition, we must recruit talented individuals to the region and create social networking programs that encourage newcomers to become long-term residents. In particular, university-based and alternative certification programs should not be advanced at the expense of the other.

ENDNOTES

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For More Information:

Andre Perry

Associate Dean and CEO
UNO's College of Education and Human
Development and
Capital One-UNO Charter School Network
aperry@uno.edu

Michael Schwam-Baird

Research Director
Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public
Education Initiatives at Tulane University
mschwamb@tulane.edu

Amy Liu

Deputy Director
Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program
aliu@brookings.edu

Allison Plyer

Deputy Director
Greater New Orleans Community Data
Center
allisonp@gnocdc.org

About The New Orleans Index at Five

Over the past five years, the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program have tracked the recovery of New Orleans and the metro area through the regular publication of *The New Orleans Index*—indicators of the social and economic recovery of the New Orleans metro. The Index’s value as a regularly updated, one-stop shop of Katrina recovery indicators has made it the go-to resource for national and local media, decision-makers across all levels of government, researchers, and leaders in the private sector and nonprofit community.

This year, *The New Orleans Index at Five* aims to move past disaster recovery to assess the remaking of a great American city and examine the extent to which New Orleans is poised to bounce back from any shock better than before. This *Index* is intended to be the first of a series of reports that measure progress and prosperity in the greater New Orleans area with indicators and essays that change over time depending on new data availability, relevance, and the needs of the community.

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