



Everything New Orleans

## Sci Academy lottery sheds light on evolution of school choice in New Orleans

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By **Andrew Vanacore, The Times-Picayune**

Pamela Morrell sat nervously in the third row Thursday evening among the lines of blue chairs set up in the school cafeteria at Sci Academy, a **charter** high school in eastern New Orleans.



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John McCusker, The Times-Picayune archive

Algebra students at Sci Academy were photographed in October.

Her son, Charles, already has a spot at another school for the fall, when he'll be starting ninth grade. But Morrell didn't like what she saw during a visit there: "The first thing I want to see when I walk in a school is not a metal detector."

So she waited to hear whether Charles would get one of 130 seats chosen in a random lottery, when nearly three times that many students applied.

This is lottery season in the newly remade New Orleans school system. Similar rituals have been enacted across the city over the past few

weeks.

Sci Academy must compete for students with every other high school in the city. There are no neighborhood attendance areas. And having proved that it can take children who are years behind in their lessons and improve their results quickly, the school is dealing with a tremendous influx of applications.

To the architects of school reform, this is exactly how things should play out. Except for a few of the selective-enrollment schools, Sci Academy is doing the best job of any high school at getting its students past the state exit exams. Parents or guardians, newly empowered to choose where their children will get an education, are rewarding quality.

Still, the word about Sci's success took some time to spread. Last year, with many fewer applicants, every interested student was able to enroll. The scene here Thursday night showed that parents are beginning to grasp

the complexities of the new system -- and also the anguish and panic that can sometimes accompany trying to find a place in that system.

Morrell got lucky. She heard her number spoken into the microphone at the front of the room -- 9039 -- and knew Charles had a spot. Beaming, she put a hand on her heart and reminded herself, "Breathe!"

But Shelia Vigne did not hear her number called among the first 130, joining 200 others on the waiting list. She left the school Thursday evening looking weary and contemplating whether to move out of the city.

"The most important thing is to have our kids in a good school," Vigne explained. Three other schools have already said they don't have a place for her daughter, Jordan.

Students who don't win a spot at Sci Academy or a selective school like Lusher or Ben Franklin will have to find a spot elsewhere. And many high schools are still struggling.

Vigne's daughter will have a place at Clark High if she wants, but Clark has put up state school performance scores in the low 20s, with anything under 65 considered failing. The FirstLine charter organization will take over Clark in the fall but will just be beginning the work of turning it around.

Still, Sci Academy and many other schools around New Orleans have begun to put a dent in the city's reputation for bad schools. Next year, Sci will expand the number of students it can take with two new campuses, though it doesn't have building assignments yet.

In fact, it doesn't have a building assignment for the school it already runs. It's housed in a modular campus on Read Boulevard. Many of its hallways are open-air and leave students exposed in a heavy rain.

The school has still managed to prove itself to many parents. Others have had lotteries, but few have been able to draw the kind of crowd Sci Academy did Thursday. Several hundred people turned out, even though they could have stayed home and waited for a phone call.

Along with good test scores, the school has had an extensive recruitment program. It assigned a staff member to the job for the first time this year and tried to hit every eighth-grade classroom in the city with the school's pitch, said Morgan Carter, the school's chief growth officer.

"They really want their students to excel," said Nikesha Dominick, who was there waiting to see if her stepdaughter Lexsis Dominick would get a spot. "That's what we want for her."

Sabra Williams, there with her daughter Niyoki Carter, had heard about the school's reputation for discipline. There are right and left lanes painted down the school's hallways. Conversations during class time must be kept to a whisper, backs are kept straight at all times and pants are not allowed to sag.

"They don't take a lot of foolishness," Williams said. "I like that."

Carter rolled her eyes: "You would!"

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