

## New Orleans Schools Seize Post-Katrina Momentum

**Devastated District Emerges From Storm's Shadow Changed—and Challenged**

By **Erik W. Robelen**

*New Orleans*

As public schools open all over the city this month, you don't have to look far for signs of how the education landscape here has changed since Hurricane Katrina struck five years ago.

There's the towering billboard visible from Interstate 10 near the Superdome urging families to enroll at Sophie B. Wright Charter School, just one example of the dominant place charters now fill in New Orleans' mix of schools. There are the arrays of portable classrooms that still serve as homes for some schools awaiting permanent facilities.

And there are the many new faces of educators who have come from all over the country to a city where an unprecedented, state-led effort has been under way to reinvent public education after the devastating storm and the mass exodus of students it caused.

New Orleans finds itself with a transformed educational system—more a collection of schools, really, as some observers point out—and one that continues to evolve. This new reality comes as the city's public school population stood at about 38,000 as of February, well below the estimated 65,000 before the levees failed and the floodwaters rose.

Charter schools, only a small presence before the storm hit on Aug. 29, 2005, now are ascendant, representing about 70 percent of the city's 88 public schools. With more of the independently operated and autonomous public schools still opening, and others expanding, charters are estimated to serve at least two-thirds of the public school population this academic year, a far higher rate than in any other city.

At the same time, the state of Louisiana has become a major player, having assumed control of most of the city's public schools. The state's **Recovery School District** is directly running about two dozen schools this year, and it has approved and oversees 46 others that operate as charters.

The local **Orleans Parish school district**—which before the storm was widely seen as chronically low-achieving, mismanaged, and in financial disarray—now has responsibility for a far smaller set of schools than before the storm, 16 in all.

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School choice has become a central and defining characteristic of public schooling in the city; previously, choice was largely a matter of families opting out of the public system to give their children a private or parochial education.

“Parents are now given a choice and not just told to go here,” said Sharon L. Clark, a New Orleans native and the principal of Sophie B. Wright Charter School, in the Uptown section of the city. “We have 20 percent [of students] from nearby, and the other 80 percent are citywide, from New Orleans East to the Lower Ninth Ward to across the river.”

Early state test returns suggest that, on average, the city’s public school students are doing substantially better than before Katrina.

“We’re experiencing a dramatic increase in academic achievement,” said Paul G. Pastorek, the state superintendent of public instruction. “But perhaps more importantly, we have a revival of public schools in New Orleans. And it’s a revival that has a lot of legs.”

Mr. Pastorek and others acknowledge, though, that the city has a long way to go. For example, as of last fall, 42 percent of public schools were still rated by the state as “academically unacceptable.”

And many observers say there have been, and continue to be, plenty of difficulties.

Concerns persist that school choice is more meaningful for savvy parents who actively seek out the best schools, or that some open-enrollment schools may try to recruit students with a stronger academic background.

Special education is drawing attention, amid charges that some charters may discourage students with disabilities from enrolling, and that some of those students are pushed into schools that are unable to serve them adequately. Some charter leaders worry about the high costs of transporting students across the city.

To be sure, the state takeover still has sharp critics, such as Karran Harper Royal, a community activist and parent advocate for students with disabilities who argues that it was wrong of the state to usurp local control. She said the academic gains since Katrina do not warrant the takeover, noting that the local system was showing improved performance even before the hurricane.

“I don’t think it has accomplished much,” she said of the changes. “Many of the pieces have just been moved around. Children have been moved around; teachers have been moved around; schools that used to be are no more.”

### **‘Golden Opportunity’?**

In the months after Hurricane Katrina, the state took swift steps to intervene in the local school system, taking control of most public schools. Citing what she called a “golden opportunity for rebirth,” then-Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, a Democrat, won strong majorities in the state legislature that November for the takeover plan.

It set the stage for the state’s Recovery School

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**Governance Structure**

District, or RSD, to become the leading overseer and operator of New Orleans public schools. Before the storm, the RSD, established in 2003, had taken over only a handful of public schools.

The RSD quickly moved to reopen schools that it would operate directly, and over time has granted charters to outside groups to run others. As more charter schools have been established, and as the state has begun converting some RSD-run schools into charters, that sector is now the largest single provider of public education.

“We continue to transition to charters,” said Paul G. Vallas, who became the RSD superintendent in 2007. “I predict that all but a handful of [RSD] schools will end up being charters.”

Larry J. Carter Jr., the president of **United Teachers New Orleans**, which he said has about 1,000 members—although there is no collective bargaining agreement—said he has no objection to using charters as part of the strategy for New Orleans, but suggests the state is taking it too far.

“It’s just the sheer number—it causes some alarm for me in terms of equity, fairness, and just funding,” he said. “I think we rushed too quickly to really charter as many schools as we could.”

A **poll**, conducted last November for the **Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives**

at Tulane University, suggests fairly robust public support for some of the key changes, including chartering.

About two-thirds of registered voters surveyed said they agreed with the state’s decision to take over most public schools. Also, 70 percent of all voters, and 69 percent of public school parents surveyed, said charters have improved education in New Orleans.

Yet, only 32 percent of voters said they think the public schools have improved since the storm, while 17 percent said they were better beforehand, and 30 percent said they were about the same.

Rene Lewis-Carter, who was a principal in a regular New Orleans public school before Katrina, sees the changes as positive.

“I know that what we were doing pre-Katrina did not work,” she said. “It was just years and years of institutional neglect.”

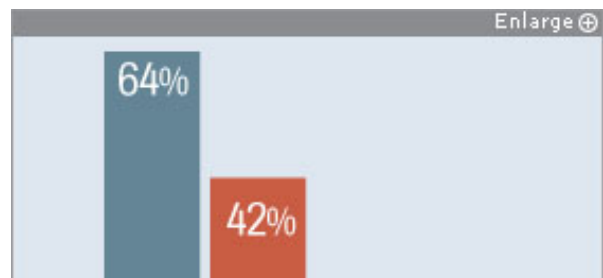


## Public School Enrollment



Note: Data for 2005 was not provided.

## Public Schools in New Orleans Rated as Academically Unacceptable



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

including chartering.

The main change she sees in her job now, as the principal of Martin Behrman Charter School, a K-8 campus in the Algiers section of New Orleans, is the autonomy.

"For the first time in my career, I've had the opportunity to make decisions and implement those that were best for the population that I serve, and if they did not work, ... to just throw them out," the principal said. "I've had the opportunity to choose and place the best teachers."

Mr. Pastorek said another significant change is the influx of talented people from outside New Orleans who are now leading or teaching in the city's schools.

"We've been successful in creating a pipeline of talent to New Orleans that we've never been able to attract before," he said, citing as examples the work of nonprofit organizations such as Teach For America, the New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools. "We have an environment where innovation and creativity is paramount. It's welcomed, it's nurtured. People see what's happening, and they want to be here."

### A Look at the Numbers

By some key indicators, student achievement in the city appears to be on the rise since Katrina.

In 2005, just before the hurricane hit, the state identified nearly two-thirds of the city's public schools as "academically unacceptable," compared with 42 percent in 2009, according to [a report](#) issued this month by the Washington-based Brookings Institution and the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. (Preliminary 2010 data indicate no changes in the status of New Orleans schools.) Looked at another way, 67 percent of public school students were in "academically unacceptable" schools in 2005, compared with 34 percent in 2009.

State achievement data at various grade levels show considerable gains, and growth that has outpaced the state as a whole. For example, the percentage of 4th graders scoring at the "basic" level or above in reading rose from 43 percent in 2005 to 62 percent in 2010, and in math from 47 percent to 59 percent.

"In all, academic performance has been promising since the storm, though a large proportion of schools remain very low-performing, especially high schools," the Brookings report says.

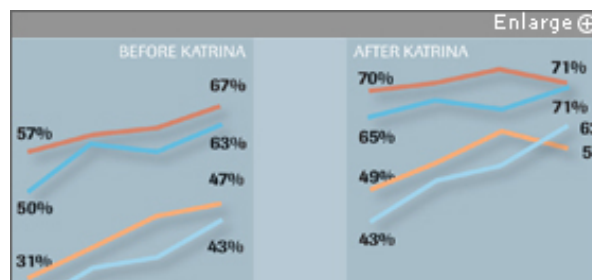
It cautions that many factors make it difficult to connect the gains to post-Katrina reforms. For one, although data suggest the demographics of the city's students are about the same since Katrina—90 percent African-American and 82 percent eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch—those figures may not tell the whole story.

Laura L. Mogg, a researcher at the Cowen Institute, says [other data](#) indicate the proportion of New Orleans families living in extreme poverty has declined.

Also, as the Brookings report notes, achievement was on an "upward trend" even before the

### High-Stakes Test Results

Percent of Students Scoring Basic or Above on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program



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

storm, though in most cases analyzed the growth rate has accelerated.

Some analysts also suggest that one-time federal aid provided to New Orleans schools after the hurricane—including \$196 million in “restart” grants to reopen schools—provided important, though temporary, resources that helped lay the groundwork for the achievement gains.

One new school that appears to be thriving is the **New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy**. Although its students on average enter as freshman four to five grade levels behind, it’s now one of the city’s highest-performing public high schools.

Dubbed Sci Academy, the charter has an intense culture focused on preparing students for college.

“We have a mission of college success for every kid who walks in our door,” said the school’s founder and principal, Benjamin Marcovitz.

Its faculty includes people like Kaycee L. Eckhardt, who grew up in Louisiana and is now starting her third year at the school. She had been teaching and living in Japan for several years when Katrina struck, and recalls asking herself: “What can I do for New Orleans? I don’t know how to build a house. ... One thing I can do is teach. I’ll try it for a year.”

Ms. Eckhardt said she spent her first year working in several schools run by the RSD. “I was transferred twice before October,” she said.

Her teaching experience that year was frustrating, she said, but she found a kindred educational spirit in Mr. Marcovitz, and joined Sci Academy for its launch in 2008.

“I was drawn to the vision of the school,” Ms. Eckhardt said. “We all start with the belief that if you give students consistency and have high expectations for them, and treat them with respect, that they can do anything they want.”

### **‘Confusing’ Choice**

For New Orleans families, one of the biggest changes after Katrina is dealing with so many school choices in a city where neighborhood attendance zones have been eliminated.

All RSD-run schools, as well the charters it oversees, are open-enrollment. (The charters conduct lotteries if they have more applicants than spaces.) In the Orleans Parish system, which after the storm retained control of the city’s highest-performing schools, some charters use academic criteria to help determine admissions, according to Aesha Rasheed, the executive director of the New Orleans Parent Organizing Network, which publishes an annual **parents’ guide** to the city’s public schools.

### **The Mission After Katrina**



New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy teacher Kaycee Eckhardt talks about the challenges that she and other educators face in post-Katrina New Orleans.

The local district does not currently use academic criteria in admissions to the four schools it directly operates, though it did so early on after the hurricane, Ms. Rasheed said.

Keisha S. Dubuclet, who directs the parent-information center at the **Urban League of Greater New Orleans**, said she sees great value in giving families choices, but has heard plenty of stories about families that want to enroll in particular schools—even ones in their own neighborhoods—and can't get in.

"Overall, it's still confusing for people," she said.

Another concern regards what choice means for special education students.

The Montgomery, Ala.-based Southern Poverty Law Center and other advocacy groups last month filed a complaint with the Louisiana education department that outlines what they believe is the state's failure to ensure that New Orleans students with disabilities have equal access to educational services and are protected from discrimination.

Some people working in charter schools have heard such concerns firsthand.

"Parents ... will come in and say, 'I just took my special education child to three different schools, and this is the only place that would let them enroll,'" said Heather L. Kindschy, a social worker at Sojourner Truth Academy, a charter high school.

Mr. Pastorek, the state superintendent, said he takes such concerns seriously, and is working to identify the problem schools.

Looking ahead, one question is the future governance of New Orleans' schools. The Recovery School District is a temporary solution, though Mr. Pastorek said he plans to advise the state board of education to have it remain in charge for at least two or three more years. Even then, he said, steps will be taken so that charters keep their autonomy under any new arrangement.

In the meantime, with a new academic year under way, Sci Academy is focused on the day-to-day work of getting students on the path to college.

Kia Banks, now beginning her junior year, admits that she wasn't so sure as a freshman whether the charter school was a good match, "but it grew on me." Teachers like Ms. Eckhardt have been a big factor in keeping her there.

"They care a lot," she said. "Even when I'm disrespectful, the teachers still want the best from me. ... Ms. Eckhardt knows what I'm capable of."

*Special coverage of district and high school reform and its impact on student opportunities for success is supported in part by a grant from the **Carnegie Corporation of New York**.*

*Photos by Erika Larsen/Redux for Education Week*



Teacher Kaycee L. Eckhardt has been with the school since it opened in 2008.

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