

Charters give education in New Orleans a fresh start

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NEW ORLEANS – When [Hurricane Katrina](#) struck five years ago, it displaced families and destroyed schools. And the storm unwittingly provided a chance to reinvent public education in a failing school district.

So was launched the nation's biggest charter school experiment. Today, 70 percent of New Orleans public school students attend a charter school. No other city comes close. (Dallas' rate is 10 percent and growing.) So educators, lawmakers and researchers are watching for results.

One early lesson: The relative freedom of charter schools – they're independently run and exempt from many state education laws – appears to have been key to an overall boost in student performance in New Orleans. But the charter school setup alone did not guarantee success. The best ones have strong leaders, capable teachers and a relentless focus on learning.

In other words, freedom in the right hands works.

The results in New Orleans are of high interest to Texas, where the number of charter schools has exploded over the last decade despite state limits on charters. There is talk that the Legislature may raise the cap this session, as many parents, high-dollar education donors and even [Hollywood](#) filmmakers embrace the concept.

From no stars to 2

The New Orleans school system once ranked among the country's worst. And one of the worst schools was Sophie B. Wright Middle.

Wright chronically bore the state's lowest rating, academically unacceptable. Just a handful of students passed state exams. Kids got into fights and skipped class.

Today, Wright carries a two-star rating out of five, around the state average. Fights are down. Attendance is up.

What changed?

Five years ago, Wright became a charter school with its own governing board. Principal Sharon Clark said that autonomy has made all the difference.

"You are given the ability to really work with your community and your parents and make decisions that really benefit kids," said Clark, a 43-year-old New Orleans native who came to Wright in 2001.

Under the old school system, superintendents came and went along with their pet reading or math programs. Teachers ran short on textbooks and basic supplies.

Wright was one of the few city schools to become a charter before Hurricane Katrina. And it was among the first to reopen after, in January 2006.

Clark said she can make swift decisions like never before. She holds up a list of requests from her teachers. One wanted a digital projector, another needed workbooks. Yet another teacher asked for a smaller fifth-period class. Everything teachers asked for, they got within 30 days, Clark said.

As a charter, Wright was able to buy its own school buses, which saved money. And Clark could decide to put middle-schoolers in single-sex classrooms ("fewer distractions," she explains) and do away with D letter grades (to push students to work harder for a C rather than fail).

Wright also enjoys the freedom to not try new things. Of all the reading programs to cycle through under the old school system, Wright instructors preferred one called Success For All, so they kept it.

Some schools or districts favor a lock-step team approach, with teachers teaching the same thing the same way, to ensure consistency. Not at Wright.

"Teachers just know that they have to teach," Clark said. "We give you anything and everything you need – the rest is up to you."

Power to hire and fire

Another charter school, New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy – nicknamed Sci Academy – opened two years ago.

Benjamin Marcovitz, Sci Academy's 31-year-old principal, said the charter structure makes it easier to customize to student needs. Two weeks into the first school year, instructors realized that most freshmen read only at a fifth-grade level. Over one frenzied weekend, the staff overhauled the English curriculum. Out went novels like *Lord of the Flies*. In came an extra class on writing and grammar.

Charter schools also have more power to hire and fire teachers.

When promising candidates apply to Sci Academy, Marcovitz observes them teaching. He makes suggestions and returns a week later to observe again. It's a lengthy recruiting process, often six to eight weeks.

Marcovitz said the most successful teachers work 12 hours a day, six days a week the first year. Teachers post their phone numbers in their classrooms and take calls from students as late as 9:30 p.m.

Sci Academy staff members are mostly in their 20s or early 30s, with degrees from Yale, [Harvard](#), UC-Berkeley and other top universities. Many are veterans of Teach For America, a national program that recruits promising college graduates to teach in poor communities.

"We get teachers who buy into this model, who really believe that kids can come in way behind grade level and that they can achieve college success," said Morgan Carter, the school's chief growth officer.

Junior Alexandra Harris said the teachers push students even when they don't want to be pushed. "And they're going to always be there," she said. "Whatever the teachers do, they do it for a reason, for you to succeed."

The storm factor

Before Hurricane Katrina, more than 60 percent of New Orleans public schools were rated unacceptable. After Katrina hit, the state placed the worst campuses into a state system, the [Recovery School District](#). Many of those schools became charters.

The charter schools are doing better on average – state figures show that 13 percent of them rated unacceptable this spring, compared with 65 percent of the Recovery district's traditional schools.

That doesn't mean charter schools are inherently better than traditional schools, experts say.

"The truth is there are good charter schools and there are bad charter schools, and there are good traditionally operated schools and ones that are failing," said [Shannon Jones](#) Couhig, executive director of the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, a [Tulane University](#) think tank.

Cowen experts say that for many reasons, comparing performance of Recovery charter schools with traditional campuses can be misleading. For instance, many charters formed after Katrina and therefore got to start from scratch.

They also say the autonomy that charters foster does not guarantee success

"It takes strong leadership. It takes somebody who's been in education, who knows what has worked in the past," said Joy Askin, a curriculum coordinator at Sophie B. Wright. "It's not always about, 'Let's just pour a lot of new stuff into the school.' "

Charters not cure-all

Despite the growing popularity of charter schools, most experts say simply converting urban school systems into a sea of autonomous charter schools is not the answer.

In New Orleans, the hasty switch to so many independent charter schools created some unintended consequences.

"There's no one paying attention to all schools in Orleans Parish," Couhig said. "There is a need for some sort of entity to oversee this, to make sure kids' needs are being met."

Some charter schools have been accused of turning away children with disabilities or giving them an inferior education. And having principals oversee academics, budgeting, hiring and building requires a lot of expertise.

A turnover like the one in New Orleans is not likely in Dallas, but the rise of charters is forcing a mindset shift in school districts.

A [Dallas ISD](#) task force was recently formed to study how the traditional school system can work with, not against, the growing charter school contingent. The district has also taken steps in recent years to provide greater power to school principals, including staffing and budget decisions.

As for New Orleans, the schools are far from fixed. Extra federal dollars and donations that had doubled spending to \$16,000 per student are now drying up.

And [Louisiana](#) must decide whether Recovery School District campuses should return to the New Orleans city system.

At a recent public hearing, one Wright parent made his wish clear:

"The choice we have now is a better choice," James Watson said. "All of the parents at Wright have access to the principal, to the administrators. Our voices count."

MORE ON TWO NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS

Sci Academy

Opened in 2008

210 students

9-11

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

98%

89%

17%

History

Enrollment

Grades

Black

Low income

In special education

Sophie B. Wright

Converted from traditional

to charter school in 2005

420 students

6-12

91%

96%

10%

BEFORE AND AFTER KATRINA

The New Orleans area lost tens of thousands of students after the storm. Here are the effects on the demographic makeup of public school children there. A comparison with Dallas ISD shows a different racial division but a similar percentage of poor students.

	New Orleans public schools 2004-05	New Orleans public schools 2009-10	Dallas ISD
Students	65,000	38,000	157,000
Black	93%	90%	26%
White	3.5%	5%	5%
Hispanic	1 %	2 %	68%
Other	3.5%	5%	1%
Low income	77%	82%	87%

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research