

The Hidden Connection in City-wide Reform:

How Charter Schools
Can Bring Equity to
Public Education

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How Charter Schools Can Bring Equity to Public Education

Over the past decade, New Orleans civic leaders reinvented the city's public education system. Today, 93 percent of New Orleans public school children attend charter schools. No other urban school system in the nation has gone so far in rethinking how public education can be delivered to at-risk students.

This transition from government-operated to government-regulated schooling has produced significant gains in academic achievement. Rigorous research demonstrates that New Orleans charter schools outperform similarly situated schools across the state of Louisiana. High school graduation rates have increased by nearly 20 percentage points, ACT scores are up, and, on most metrics, New Orleans is rapidly approaching state averages.

Much of the national commentary on education in New Orleans has focused on the growth of the city's charter school sector, and whether or not this growth has increased student learning.

But education reform is about more than academic achievement; it is also about equity. If we assign students to schools based on their zip codes, true opportunity will not be realized. If we expel our hardest to serve students in the efforts to serve the majority, the moral foundation of reform

will be eroded. If we ignore the needs of students with severe disabilities, we will not be delivering on our public promise of education for all.

Unfortunately, in most cities across the country, educational inequity is the norm. Students are assigned to schools based on their family's ability to afford property. Students with special needs do not receive the educational opportunities they deserve. In sum, our nation's urban education systems are suffering from twin crises of academic failure and systemic inequity.

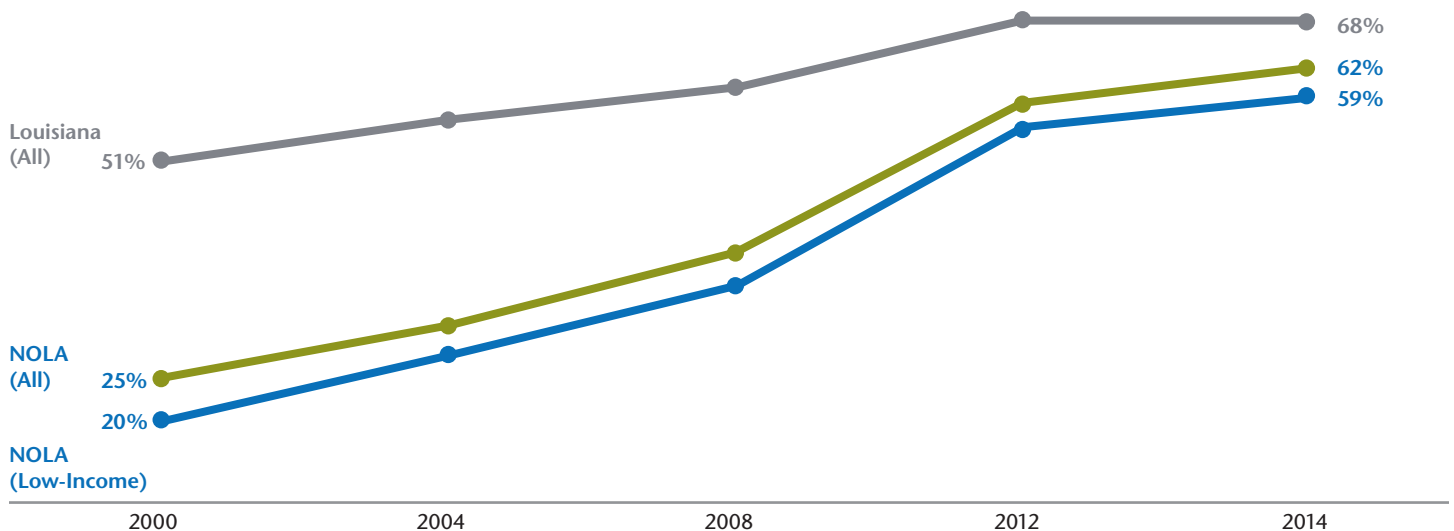
Many civic leaders believe that the New Orleans reform strategy holds promise for increasing educational outcomes in other cities. This is likely true. But this is also true: New Orleans continues to make an equally meaningful contribution to advancing educational equity while advancing educational outcomes.

In order to ensure city or district-wide reform efforts are successful in other cities, advocates and practitioners should take lessons from New Orleans focus on systemic equity to improve academic outcomes.

This is the untold story of New Orleans education reform. It is a story of how charter schools can increase equity in our public school systems. And it is a story that holds lessons for cities across the country, particularly those cities seeking recovery district-type reform.

Students in New Orleans are approaching statewide average performance

Percent of students on grade-level (Gr. 3-11)



Source: Louisiana Department of Education
For iLEAP/LEAP (Grades 3-8), scoring "Basic" or above is on grade-level.
For high school (formerly GEE, now End-of-Course exams, or EOC), scoring "Good" or above is on grade level.



The Four Equities: Access, Exit, Finances, and Service

While New Orleans can serve as an example of systemic improvement, to be clear, much remains to be accomplished in delivering an excellent and equitable public education to all New Orleans students. New Orleans still suffers from low levels of absolute achievement (despite tremendous growth), and leaders are still trying to develop the policies and processes that will deliver full educational equity. New Orleans is not an educational Nirvana.

Moreover, at the outset of the reform effort, New Orleans leaders failed to ensure that all schools in the city adopted equitable practices. Bad apples in the charter community denied enrollment to students with severe special needs and expelled students for low-level infractions. While these schools were in the minority, their practices brought into question whether or not the reforms could benefit every student.

Over the past five years, however, these initial equities have in many ways been addressed. The Recovery School District (RSD), the state turnaround district, has led much of this work, and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) (local school district) has recently begun to take steps of its own to ensure educational equity.

In a decentralized system where schools are primarily held accountable for academic results, the need for governmental regulatory oversight of equity is acute. In becoming better regulators, the RSD and OPSB are fulfilling roles that only they can fill.

Specifically, over the past five years, New Orleans has made significant progress in four key areas: access, exit, finances, and service.

ACCESS: The RSD, in partnership with schools and communities, developed a unified enrollment system (One App) that provides transparent, efficient, and equal access to schools across the city.

EXIT: A centralized expulsion hearing office, as well as a unified code for expulsions, were created by education leaders to ensure that New Orleans students were only removed from school for extremely serious behavior infractions.

FINANCES: The RSD overhauled its funding formula to provide schools with significantly more money for serving students with significant needs.

SERVICE: Both the RSD and OPSB set high standards for public schools, and both entities devoted resources to ensure that specialized programs were available to high need students.

The Four Drivers: Separation of Powers, Values-Driven Leadership, the Advocates, and Lack of Ideologues

While understanding the mechanics of the New Orleans equity work is important, it is also important to understand why this work occurred in New Orleans.

Why is it that New Orleans, and not other cities across the country, has arguably made the most headway in developing innovative structures and policies to buttress educational equity?

How is it that a system of charter schools, which are often maligned for inequitable practices, have pioneered efforts to increase equity?

For cities to build educational systems that promote equity, these cities must set the structural and cultural foundation for change. Of course, New Orleans built its system in a post-emergency environment, but with numerous other cities across the country nearing 30 to 50 percent charter enrollment share, the rules and processes of New Orleans hold lessons for other systems.

In New Orleans, the key drivers of equity included:

SEPARATION OF POWERS: By delegating the operation of schools to non-profits, the Recovery School District was able to evolve into a sophisticated, independent regulator of schools.

VALUES-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP: By and large, New Orleans governmental leaders and educational entrepreneurs have placed significant importance on educational equity; perhaps more so than most charter sectors, New Orleans educators have internalized the moral imperative to serve every child.

THE ADVOCATES: While they often clashed with reformers, social justice advocates kept equity at the forefront of the public conversation and ensured that reform leaders prioritized equity initiatives.

NO IDEOLOGUES: New Orleans reform leaders continually favored pragmatic solutions that often cut against both liberal and conservative ideologies, with certain actions involving radical decentralization (transitioning to charter school system) and other actions involving significant centralization of power (unified expulsion and enrollment processes).



Patrick Dobard, Superintendent of the Recovery School District

Few superintendents have done more for educational equity than Patrick Dobard. A career educator and New Orleans native, Dobard's milestones are numerous: he transitioned the RSD to an all charter system; he made incredible headway in building bridges across race, class, and political groups; he negotiated the end to the Southern Poverty Law Center's lawsuit on special education violations; and he and his team led the overhaul of the district's method of financing schools for serving students with severe special needs. He both relinquished educational power to educators and families while at the same time consolidating power over equity functions—providing a new model for how superintendents can drive change in their communities.

4 Equities

Equity in Access: Eliminating the Property Privilege

In most large cities in this country, a family’s ability to buy or rent expensive property determines whether or not the family can send their children to a high-quality public school. This connection between property and public institution access harks back to darker eras in our nation’s history, eras when the right to vote, work, and serve in government were restricted by wealth and race.

The value of the “neighborhood school” is the current justification for connecting residence to school access. Undoubtedly, there are legitimate reasons to support neighborhood schools: families value school proximity, and a neighborhood school can connect the greater community to the children in the area. However, neighborhood schools also serve as the anchors of extreme inequality in access to public schools.

In attempting to provide equitable access to schools, and thereby reduce the connection between access and wealth, New Orleans leaders had to grapple with the tension between the value of equity in access and the value of neighborhood proximity. Additionally, leaders had to develop an efficient and transparent process that could serve all New Orleans families.

Ultimately, the lottery enrollment system was built with the following rules:

- **CITY-WIDE ACCESS:** All students have an opportunity to submit an application to the 70 schools participating in the enrollment system (nine OPSB schools remain outside the system).
- **ONE FORM, NUMEROUS ENROLLMENT CENTERS:** All schools in the city use the same application form, and applications can be submitted online or at enrollment centers around the city.
- **LETTER GRADE IDENTIFICATION:** Letter grade labels are placed next to the school’s name on the enrollment form to provide clear and accessible performance information to families as they select school options.
- **ELEMENTARY NEIGHBORHOOD SET ASIDES:** K-8 schools are allowed to utilize geographic preference for 50 percent of their seats, with the preference tied to one of eight enrollment zones in the city.
- **HIGH SCHOOL OPEN ACCESS:** High schools are not allowed to utilize geographic preferences.
- **SIBLING PREFERENCE:** Siblings are given preference to schools where their family members are enrolled.
- **SCHOOL CLOSURE PREFERENCE:** All students whose school was closed due to poor performance are given enrollment preference for the subsequent school year.

LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES:

Key Design Elements of Enrollment Systems

- **UNIVERSAL:** *Develop one enrollment form that can be used by all families for all schools.*
- **TRANSPARENT:** *Provide letter grade performance indicator for each school on enrollment form.*
- **ACCESSIBLE:** *Provide free transportation within a reasonable radius, with the aim of ensuring families have access to multiple high-quality schools.*

- **SELECTIVE SCHOOL PARTICIPATION:** Schools with selection requirements (academic, arts, foreign language etc.) are allowed to keep their requirements.
- **FREE TRANSPORTATION:** All RSD schools are required to provide free transportation.

Government leaders, community members, families, and school leadership jointly developed these rules. The rules continue to be altered as issues arise and values evolve. Clearly, the rules are not perfect, nor will they work for every community. However, they provide a useful starting point for creating a unified enrollment system.

Polling efforts and rigorous research continue to unearth areas of support and contention. All told, 72 percent of voters support having a combination of city-wide access and some level of geographic set-asides.¹ Additionally, a study by New Orleans Education Research Alliance found that low-income families now have a greater access to higher-quality schools closer to their homes than anytime in the past decade.²

Most respondents support open school enrollment over geographic school assignment.

Geographic Assignment | Open Enrollment



All Respondents

The majority of respondents also believe that open enrollment has had a positive impact on education.

Negative | Positive



All Respondents

<http://educationresearchalliance.nola.org/files/publications/ERA1402-Policy-Brief-What-Schools-Do-Families-Want.pdf>

¹ http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/cowen_poll_2015.pdf

² <http://educationresearchalliance.nola.org/files/publications/ERA1402-Policy-Brief-What-Schools-Do-Families-Want.pdf>

4 Equities

Moreover, the new enrollment system was a key part of settling a long-stranding special education lawsuit in the city, with the plaintiffs viewing the new system as a key method to increase equity in access.³

That being said, there have been logistical breakdowns in the system, which at times have led to family frustration. Additionally, families continue to raise concerns about not having guaranteed access to a neighborhood school. Lastly, early research is demonstrating that higher-income families more narrowly focus on academics when choosing a school than do low-income families, which has raised some equity concerns.

Yet, despite its imperfections, unified enrollment is far more equitable than assigning schools based on property values. Public schools should not be the equivalent of neighborhood country clubs, and in New Orleans they no longer are. The broader community as well as individual students benefit from equitable city-wide access to public schools, because it creates a better public good.

Equity in Exit: Reducing the School to Prison Pipeline

Across the country, formal and informal rules and practices continue to push at-risk students out of schools, into the streets, and, ultimately, into prison. In New Orleans, high dropout rates had been the norm. Before Katrina, only 54 percent of New Orleans freshman eventually graduated high school; the rest dropped out or were expelled. Today the graduation rate is 73 percent.

To reverse these inequities in exits, New Orleans leaders have focused both on reducing the absolute number of exits, as well as reducing the variation in dropouts, transfer, and expulsion rates across schools. Due to increased monitoring, there were only 156 midyear transfers throughout the system. Perhaps most importantly, juvenile arrests have nearly been cut in half over the past six years.

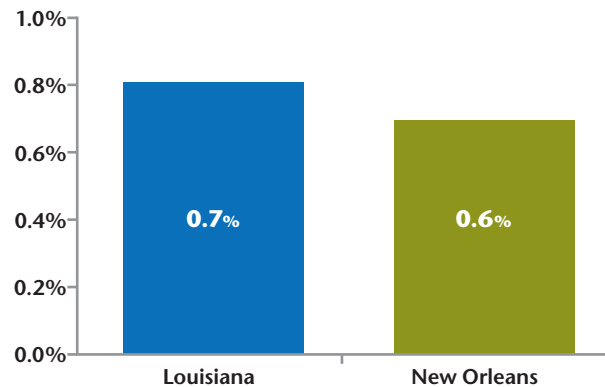
In order to increase equity, RSD leaders centralized and standardized many expulsion practices. Ultimately, the

LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES:

Getting Exit and Transfers Right

- **CENTRALIZED AND INDEPENDENT:** *Develop a unified process for expulsion that is administered by a neutral and independent entity.*
- **SHARED OWNERSHIP OF BACKFILLING:** *Ensure all schools share the responsibility of serving mid-year enrollees.*

New Orleans Expulsion Rate is Below State Average



http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2015/02/no_change_in_new_orleans_publi.html

charter community accepted most of these rules. This incurred, in part, because equity-driven charter schools were affected by the negative behaviors of a few bad actors.

Currently, the New Orleans exit system is based on the following rules:

- **CENTRALIZED EXPULSION RULES AND HEARINGS:** All RSD schools have adopted the same expulsion code, and the RSD central office operates all expulsion hearings. No individual school can expel a student without RSD approval.
- **RESTRICTED TRANSFERS:** After October 1st, families must show hardship to transfer from one school to another, thereby reducing both mobility rates and the counseling out of students.
- **NO PYRAMIDING ENROLLMENT SLOTS:** Individual schools must offer the same number of seats at all grade levels, which reduces the incentive to exit students, as new students can fill the newly available spot.
- **ALIGNED ACCOUNTABILITY:** Schools with an eighth grade are penalized in the letter grade system if their students do not enroll in high schools, and high schools must carry a zero for the test scores of students who drop out (until this student would have graduated).

To date, these practices spurred significant reductions in student expulsions. Currently, the city's expulsion rate is lower than the state average, despite New Orleans serving a much more at-risk student body.⁴

The transition to an all charter school system, coupled with equity-driven leadership, has resulted in more students staying in school than any other time in the city's recent history.

³ http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2015/02/federal_judge_approves_landmar.html

⁴ FRL rates, Orleans Parish compared to State of Louisiana: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1480-public-school-students-eligible-to-receive-free-or-reduced-lunch?loc=20&loct=5#detail>
ed/5/3255/true/1026,921,800,88,87/any/9455,9456

4 Equities

Equity in Finances: Allocating Funds to Schools Doing the Hardest Work

Education policy makers are notorious for adding additional responsibilities to public schools without providing these schools with adequate funds. On a student level, this often results in students with significant needs being literally shortchanged; a lack of personalized funding formulas leads student level inequities. Traditionally, New Orleans has been no different than most cities in both these regards.

After Hurricane Katrina, the RSD implemented a student-based funding formula that provided some additional funds for schools serving students with disabilities but, especially in the case of students with severe special needs, these funds rarely covered the cost of service. Moreover, alternative schools were perpetually underfunded, both due to their fluctuating enrollment patterns and the severity of their students' needs.

As with enrollment and expulsion regulation, many schools were willing partners with the RSD in developing a solution, in large part because they were subject to external funding shocks anytime a student with severe special needs enrolled in their schools.

Together, education leaders overhauled the financing formula based on the following rules:

- **FUNDING BASED ON SERVICE REQUIREMENTS:** Special education students are funded by service requirements, not solely by disability category.

Funding Category	Per Pupil Rate
Base (State & Local) Funding	\$7,843
Tier 1 IEP (speech/language) Supplementary Funding	+\$1,438
Tier 2 IEP (low service intensity) Supplementary Funding	+\$8,220
Tier 3 IEP (moderate service intensity) Supplementary Funding	+\$13,358
Tier 4 IEP (high service intensity) Supplementary Funding	+\$15,414
Tier 5 IEP (highest service intensity) Supplementary Funding	+\$20,552

LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES:

Fair Financing

- **WEIGHTED FUNDING:** *Develop significant weights (up to 3-4x) for at-risk students so that schools that serve the hardest to reach students receive the necessary resources.*
- **INSURANCE POOL:** *Create an insurance pool to provide funding to schools for students with exceptional needs.*

- **WEIGHTED SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING:** Schools with students with disabilities who have the most significant needs now receive more than three times the base state per-pupil funding; additionally, schools can apply to a high-risk insurance pool on a case-by-case basis.

- **ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL FUNDING TIED TO EXPULSION RATES:** Schools that expel students must transfer 150 percent of the pro-rated daily per-pupil funding to the alternative schools so long as the student is placed at the school.

All of these formulas were put in place without increasing the amount of public funding; rather, the RSD shifted funds to schools that were serving the most needy students. Similarly, OPSB reallocated funding to prioritize adequately serving high needs students.

In New Orleans, schools are no longer fiscally punished for serving students with the greatest needs. Fiscal incentives and moral mandates are now aligned.

Equity in Service: Operating a School is a Privilege, Not a Right

In too many cities, the government turns a blind eye to the persistence of failing schools, thereby undermining any real hope for educational equity. In these cities, operating a school is the right of the incumbent: save for the most extreme circumstances, the school goes on.

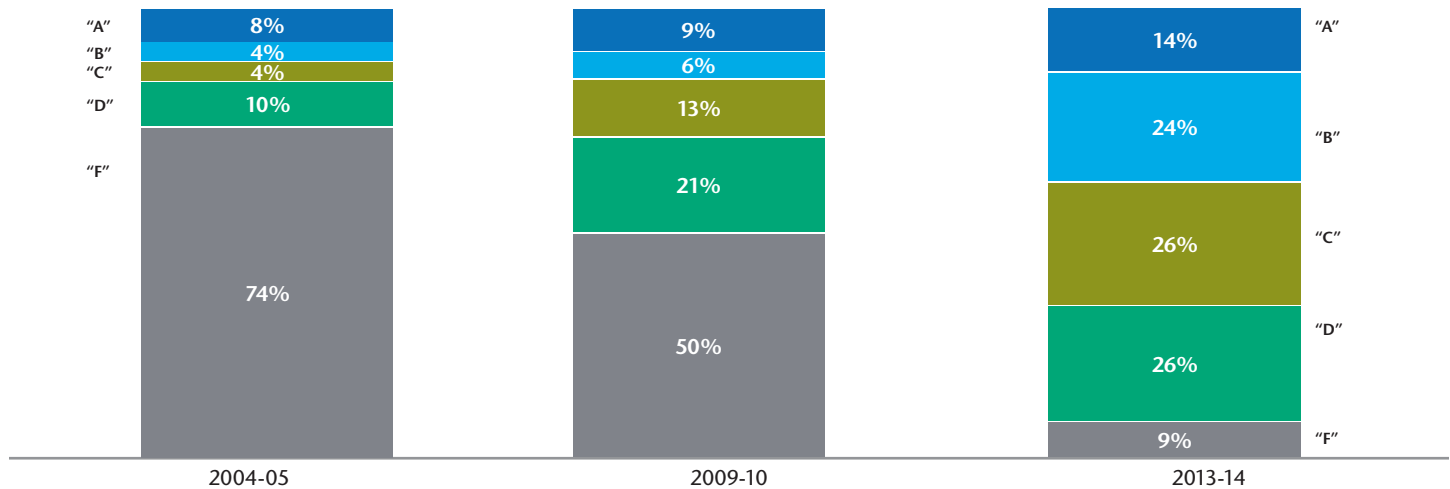
In New Orleans, this dynamic has been reversed. Operating a school and serving New Orleans children is a privilege, not a right. And this right is revoked when school operators fail to educate children.

Over the past decade, 100 percent of schools that have not met performance targets within five years have been closed. No city in America is so rigorous in its quest for holding schools accountable for educating children.

Moreover, the RSD recently raised the bar for charter renewals; previously, only schools that received "F" ratings were subject to non-renewal. Now, schools must achieve a "C" rating to be continually renewed. In New Orleans, "D" is the new "F." The city, which serves an extremely at-risk

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Nearly 40% of students attend “A” and “B” schools – up from 12% in 2005
 % citywide enrollment, by letter grade; 2005*, 2010, 2014**



* In 2004-05 and 2009-10, "F" indicates SPS <75 (out of 200).

** Schools in their first two years of turnaround receive "T" letter grades. For clarity, they are categorized according to the letter grade that corresponds to their SPS score.

population, has created an accountability system that is more rigorous than the accountability system that applies to traditional schools across the state.

This accountability system is based on the following rules:

- **LETTER GRADES:** All schools receive an “A” through “F” letter grade that is determined by a mix of absolute and growth academic performance.
- **ESCALATING RENEWAL REQUIREMENTS IN THE RSD:** Upon first renewal, a charter school must either achieve a “D” rating or demonstrate significant growth; upon second renewal, a charter school must achieve a “C” rating or achieve significant growth to be renewed.
- **A HIGH BAR FOR OPSB:** OPSB recently overhauled its renewal process, implementing an even higher absolute standard than that of the RSD.
- **RSD JURISDICTION:** In the case that OPSB fails to take action on a failing school, the RSD retains the legal right to transfer the school away from OPSB and to a new charter operator.

While the accountability framework sets high standards, the letter grade system is far from perfect, as it assigns more weight to absolute performance than it does to growth. This is beginning to change, and recently more weight will have been placed on growth metrics; ideally, growth will become the primary accountability metric. To date, however, nearly all of the charter schools that have closed also had low growth scores (as measured by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes rigorous

research)⁵; however, as the bar for renewal rises, there is a risk that the connection between closure and low growth will be less robust.

If this occurs, schools will be penalized for serving at-risk students.

But, to date, the accountability system has been a key driver in increasing the performance of New Orleans schools. In 2005, nearly 44 percent of failing schools in the state were located in New Orleans, despite the fact the New Orleans has historically served less than 10 percent of the students in the state of Louisiana. By 2014, this failing school share had dropped to less than 10 percent.

Within a few years, it is likely that not a single New Orleans student will be forced to attend a failing public school.

Of course, excellence—and not mediocrity—is the long-term goal. And New Orleans still has a way to go before its schools deliver an excellent education to all students.

LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES:

Accountability

- **LETTER GRADES:** *Develop letter grades that are heavily tied to academic growth performance measures.*
- **AUTOMATIC REVOCATION:** *Create clear, numerically based measure for charter renewal; schools that do not meet this bar should have their charters revoked.*
- **GUARANTEED TRANSFORMATION:** *All existing schools that have been failing for three years or more should be transitioned to a new operator or closed.*

5 CREDO Louisiana Report: Site: https://credo.stanford.edu/documents/la_report_2013_7_26_2013_final.pdf

Separation of Powers: Unlocking Innovations in Regulation

In most public education systems, the government is given the dual task of operating and regulating schools. While it is theoretically possible to execute both tasks well, in practice, most urban districts fail to achieve excellence in either operation or regulation.

Moreover, inherent conflicts exist when both duties sit with the same entity. When a cash-strapped district redistributes revenue by allowing an excellent charter school to replicate, there will often be a temptation to suppress the growth of high-performing non-district schools.

Unfortunately, this dynamic of weak operation and weak regulation existed in the RSD post-Katrina. The RSD struggled to effectively manage the schools it directly runs, and it also failed to prevent inequitable practices amongst a portion of the charter sector. To be fair, some of this was due to the incredibly difficult conditions presented by working in a post-natural disaster environment. Additionally, the national development of innovative regulatory systems was in its earliest stages, making best practice adoption of limited use.

Fortunately, the RSD has transformed its strategy and structure and made the bold decision to stop operating schools.

Ultimately, it is not a coincidence that there has been a direct relationship between the RSD reducing the number of schools it operated and the RSD increasing its effectiveness as a regulator. Upon deciding that it would transition its direct run schools to the non-profit sector, the RSD

LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES:

Separating Powers

- **FULL SEPARATION:** *In cities with significant charter enrollment share, the district can follow the RSD's path and transition to becoming solely a regulator of public schools.*
- **NEW INSTITUTION:** *In cities where district schools and charters will co-exist for the foreseeable future, a new regulator can be created to oversee both sectors.*
- **NON-PROFIT DELEGATION:** *In certain instances, such as operating unified enrollment systems, third-party non-profits can be empowered to serve as neutral operational entities.*

recalibrated its mission, strategy, staffing structure, and values to focus on becoming an excellent regulator. In doing so, it launched a wave of innovative regulatory initiatives, including unified enrollment, unified expulsion, and a reworked special education financing formula, and adopted a more community-inclusive method of replacing operators.

None of this is to say that the RSD is a perfect regulator. As with many districts, it still struggles to find the right balance between community engagement, student needs, and operator autonomy. Given the nature of democracy, it is unlikely that these tensions will ever be eliminated. But with the RSD focused on regulating for performance and equity, rather than operating schools, it is well positioned to continue reinventing how government can ensure that every child has access to a good school.



Values-Driven Leadership: Aligning Structure, Regulations, and Selection to Accelerate an Equity Agenda

It is impossible for regulation, no matter how well conceived, to prevent every bad behavior. The values of those doing the work will inevitably impact whether or not equity is increased.

Post-Katrina, New Orleans attracted both local and non-local educators who desired to help rebuild public education in a city that was ravaged by a natural disaster. The origination of the reform efforts, coupled with well-designed political structures, appears to have increased pro-equity values penetration within the education ecosystem.

Of course, the opposite could have been true: the wreckage of Katrina could have paved the way for opportunistic individuals to financially benefit from the rebuilding efforts.

So why did this not occur? Why did the New Orleans ecosystem evolve to become more equity focused over time?

Unlike student achievement performance and expulsion rates, there is little hard data on the following assertions (save for arrest and conviction rates of public officials). Moreover, it is difficult to pinpoint (or prove) how a combination of circumstances and structures combined to create a values driven education sector. But it is likely that the following factors played a role:

- **STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION:** The state board of education proved to be a much more effective selector of superintendents than the Orleans Parish School Board; additionally, its rate of corruption has been lower.
- **AUTHORIZING SCHOOLS WITH THE BEST FORMER DISTRICT LEADERS:** The state's first wave of chartering post-Katrina mostly involved the highest-performing former OPSB school principals converting schools to charter; this in a sense served as a filter for transitioning the best of the old system into the new system.

■ AUTHORIZING VALUES-DRIVEN NEW

ENTREPRENEURS: The state also did a relatively good job in selecting outside entrepreneurs to launch school in New Orleans, many of whom were alums of programs such as Teach For America, a program known for values-driven leadership.

- **NON-PROFIT BOARDS OF DIRECTORS:** Louisiana's requirement that non-profit boards of directors oversee all schools led to two positive outcomes: first, the boards drew in more community participation to overseeing public schools, with over 400 New Orleanians currently serving on charter boards; second, the non-profit boards mitigated the risks of for-profit operators earning money without delivering results (as it happened, non-profit boards terminated or did not renew contracts with three for-profit operators).

Despite this progress, there have been some failures in equity and values: corrupt charter leaders, state board members, and local school board members continue to hamper the system. However, the RSD has been vigilant in monitoring many of these violations, as well as increasingly taking more aggressive punitive measures.

Given the unique circumstances of the New Orleans reform efforts, the lessons for other cities may not be applicable in all manners. That being said, systems leaders should be aware of how structure, regulations, and educator selection (at all levels) play an integral role in determining the values that undergird the public education systems.

The Advocates: Holding the Reform Community Accountable

Nationally, the education reform community and the social justice community have an uneasy relationship. While their goals are in many ways the same, each community is drawn to different strategies of social change. New Orleans has been no different in this regard.

Various organizations—including the Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and numerous community-based organizations—opposed the strategy of charter school expansion. Some were opposed to charter schools on ideological and policy grounds, others opposed the way charter schooling was implemented in New Orleans.

The differences in ideology and policy remain unresolved. However, at times, the social justice community's calling out of unjust school actions and systems level inequities accelerated the implementation of equity solutions; specifically:

- **LAWSUITS AND PUBLIC SHAMING:** The Southern Poverty Law Center's special education lawsuit, in part, led to One App and the overhauling of the special education financing formula. When schools were being publicly held accountable for serving every student, but were not yet receiving the necessary funds to do so, the need for reform was quickly amplified.
- **COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP:** In other instances, charter school leaders admitted fault and asked for support. Certain schools that have struggled with high

expulsion and suspension rates have partnered with social justice organizations to implement restorative justice programs.

- **PUBLIC SUPPORT:** Increasingly, the social justice community has come to the defense of certain RSD policies that promote equity, such as the unified enrollment system and the new expulsion system. Given the at-times adversarial nature of this relationship, moments of public support go far in validating RSD efforts that are promoting city-wide equity.

There are real tensions between the education reform community and the social justice community. However, as the RSD has become a better regulator of schools, and the social justice community has seen some of the positive impacts of effective charter schools, the relationship between the two communities has become more productive. Moreover, the social justice community has now become more active in (rightly) pointing out the fact that OPSB has been delinquent in adopting many pro-equity regulations.

Perhaps, over time, New Orleans will become a model for how education reform leaders and social justice leaders can influence each other in a manner that is for the betterment of all children. At a minimum, charter advocates need to welcome a dialogue with social justice leaders as it will create positive pressure for change.

the right—excesses that often derail attempts at thoughtful deregulation and empowerment.

No Ideologues: An Orientation Toward Pragmatism

The New Orleans reforms launched with bipartisan support: it was created by a Republican governor (Mike Foster) and expanded under a Democratic Governor (Katherine Blanco). Democratic US Senator (Mary Landrieu), and U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings led the political efforts to reinvent the public education system in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The efforts both reduced the operational role of government, typically part of the conservative agenda, and increased public spending, typically part of the liberal agenda.

This initial bipartisan coalition has mostly held over the past decade. Currently, a Democratic Mayor (Mitch Landrieu) and Republican Governor (Bobby Jindal) are both advocates for the New Orleans reforms. Moreover, this bipartisanship has been sustained despite attacks from the flanks of both parties. The far left continues to levy accusations of privatization, while the far right bemoans the centralization of equity and accountability regulations.

New Orleans leadership has generally ignored the most extreme criticism of its efforts, but, at the same time, both

system leaders and school leaders have changed their behavior due to negative feedback, both from advocates and the data itself. Many of the regulatory solutions highlighted in this report were pragmatic course corrections resulting from unexpected negative outcomes. Moreover, leaders with different political orientations developed many of the solutions.

It is unclear why pragmatism has triumphed over ideology. Perhaps New Orleans has simply been lucky to be led by pragmatic individuals. Perhaps the charter structure combines empowerment and accountability in manner that forces leaders to respond to data rather than ideology.

While it is difficult to identify the cause of this pragmatic orientation, its importance should not be underestimated. The system could have been undermined by ignoring market driven inequities or centralizing academic functions that were best left to independent entities. Education officials and advocates should keep this in mind as they select leaders for city and district-wide education reform efforts.

Of course, the New Orleans education system is by no means governed by a perfect regulatory regime, nor is it immune from ideological biases, but its leaders have managed to avoid the policy excesses of both the left and



Conclusion and Recommendations

New Orleans is in the thick of reinventing how public education systems can leverage structure, regulation, and culture to achieve dramatic increases in educational equity. If successful, New Orleans leaders may change the way public institutions ensure that the most at-risk students in our country receive equitable educational opportunities.

The New Orleans efforts were born out of both tragedy and numerous early mistakes. Many of the most significant protectors of equity were only instituted in the past few years. And it remains unclear whether OPSB will preserve these safeguards as more schools fall under local authorization.

And, as New Orleans leaders readily admit, New Orleans academic achievement still has room for growth. True equity will not be achieved until every student has access to an excellent school.

But, perhaps more than other urban center in our country, New Orleans has a chance to realize this vision. And the lessons learned by New Orleanians can be leveraged by others.

At a minimum the following considerations should be at the forefront of decision making processes:

- **ALTERNATIVE GOVERNANCE:** History has shown that elected school boards are unlikely to reform themselves without external governance pressure. State, non-profit and non-district charter authorizers, coupled with state recovery school districts, are all important tools in instituting governance reform.
- **CHOICE:** Choice is foundational for equity; allowing families to choose from different public institutions allows for better fit (finding the right school for a student), shared responsibility (all schools must serve all students from across the city), and competitive pressure (improved performance leads to increased enrollment).
- **LEGAL AUTONOMY FOR SCHOOLS:** As with any reform effort, sustainability is crucial; by legally separating regulatory and operational duties, cities can reduce the risk of officials allowing inequities to persist (because these practices benefit some government operated schools); strict separation of operation and regulation, rather than simply granting district schools increased autonomy, will protect against efforts to rollback equity.

As demonstrated in New Orleans, wide-scale charter-based reform is a viable strategy for dramatically improving educational outcomes for students. But the work is not simple, nor can we rely purely on individual operators to address all issues students and families face. Instead, schools must be empowered to provide a top-notch education and reform leaders must work to provide system-level structures that will ensure improved equity for all.

About the National Alliance



The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the public charter school movement. Our mission is to lead public education to unprecedented levels of academic achievement by fostering a strong charter sector. For more information, please visit our website at www.publiccharters.org.

About the Author

Neerav Kingsland currently consults with cities seeking to empower educators and families. He is the former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). As CEO, Neerav helped build the nation's first school system where over 90% of students attend charter schools; as a result of this structural transition, New Orleans students are achieving at the highest levels in decades. He has appeared throughout the country to detail the impact of New Orleans reforms and frequently writes on education policy in multiple national blogs. Neerav is a graduate of Tulane University and Yale Law School.



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