

Ten Years in New Orleans

Public School Resurgence and the Path Ahead

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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NEW SCHOOLS FOR
NEW ORLEANS



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Please refer to the full report for a complete list of interviewees and external reviewers who contributed to this report.

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The full report provides a more complete picture of what happened over the past 10 years. This summary focuses on successes over the past decade and the work ahead. Readers interested in the nuances of the reform process should refer to the **full report**.

Executive Summary

Introduction

New Orleans tends toward self-analysis—some would even say self-obsession. We talk constantly about our food, our politicians, our festivals, our Saints, our tragedies, and our identity. This report talks about our schools, sifting through a tangle of events to highlight important facts, applaud successful efforts, and identify remaining challenges.

The improvement to public schools in New Orleans over the past decade has been nothing short of remarkable. One could argue that New Orleans had the worst urban school system in the country before Hurricane Katrina. Now we're on par with major districts across the country—in many cases, we are beginning to surpass those districts. No city in the country has ever improved this much, this quickly. The transformation in our schools has positively affected the lives of thousands and thousands of children who would have been left behind by the old system.

Revolutionizing the role of government in public education enabled our transformation. The district moved from school operator to regulator of the system's quality and fairness. Nonprofit charter school organizations led the way on performance improvement and innovation, while simultaneously recognizing that they are not niche players—they are “the system.” They are responsible for ensuring that *every* child receives a great education.

We don't confuse progress with success. While growth has been undeniable, we are still a below-average school district in a bottom-performing state. If New Orleans stalled today, the city would land squarely in the middle ranks of our country's underperforming urban school systems. A fraction

of students would receive an excellent education, while many of the rest would be consigned to economic insecurity and a host of other negative life outcomes because our schools did not deliver.

We seek to become the first great urban public school system in the country: one whose schools compete with the best suburban districts in America; one that personalizes student experience for all children; one that provides multiple rigorous pathways through and beyond high school to help every child, regardless of background, flourish as an adult; and, in a city with a dark history of racial segregation, one that represents the racial and socioeconomic diversity of New Orleans.

To realize that vision, we must address a long list of challenges—including building a great educator workforce, increasing the number of students we graduate who are academically prepared for what's next, and developing a sustainable local governance solution. One of the most pressing is the persistent feeling among some in New Orleans that reform has happened “to” and not “with” the communities served by the schools. The anger that these New Orleanians harbor toward “reformers,” the Recovery School District, charter schools, and many other nonprofits is inextricably linked to larger issues of race, class, and privilege in New Orleans and in this country.

Our city's adults must develop a shared sense of ownership over education in New Orleans—including acknowledging real wounds, working to heal them, and moving forward together. Our public schools must become a point of civic pride. **There is no other path to excellence.**

Academic Performance

How are students doing academically? Ten years after Hurricane Katrina, students in New Orleans are performing significantly better.¹

- **More students on grade level:** In 2004, 31 percent of New Orleans students performed on grade level on state assessments, earning “Basic” or above. In 2014, that figure had doubled to 62 percent. Over the same time period, the equivalent statewide figure increased from 56 to 68 percent.
- **Fewer students trapped in low-performing schools:** 60 percent of New Orleans students—some 40,000 young people—went to a school in 2004 that performed in the bottom tenth of all Louisiana public schools. By any reasonable definition, these were failing schools. In 2014, just 13 percent of our city’s students attended a school in Louisiana’s bottom tenth.
- **More students graduating on time:** A ninth-grader entering a New Orleans public school in fall 2000 had barely a 50/50 chance to graduate on time four years later (54 percent). 73 percent of students now graduate on time.
- **Rigorous academic research affirms citywide improvement:** According to the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, the effect of New Orleans reform on student learning surpasses the impact of reforms studied in other communities, including major preschool programs and reductions in class-size.²

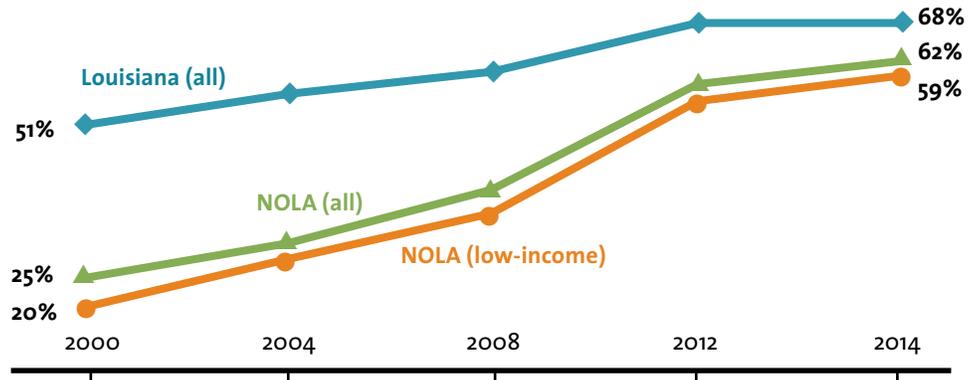


The Data Story

Students in New Orleans are performing better than ever

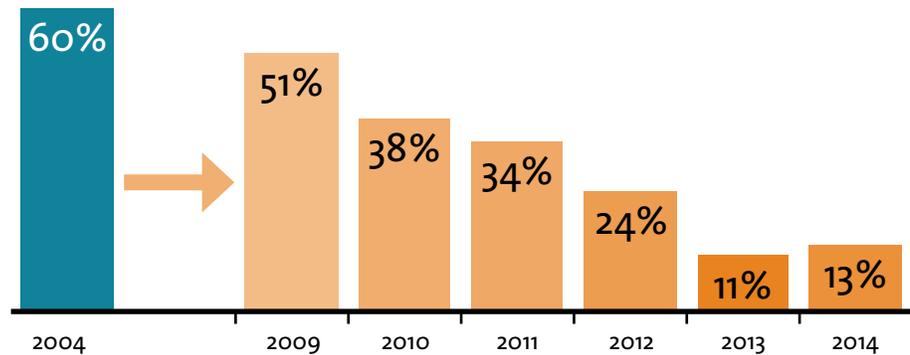
Students are closing the achievement gap with peers across the state.

Note: Percent of students on grade level (grades 3–11). For grades 3–8, scoring “Basic” or above on iLEAP/LEAP is on grade level. For high school, scoring “Good” or above on End-of-Course (EOC) exams (formerly GEE) is on grade level.



Only 13 percent of students attend schools in Louisiana’s lowest-performing decile, down from 60 percent in 2004.

Note: New Orleans students attending schools with state-issued School Performance Score (SPS) in bottom 10% statewide (10th percentile or below).



ACT scores have reached an all-time high.

17.0 → 18.8
2005 2015

Nearly all seniors take the ACT.

55% → 95%
2005 2015

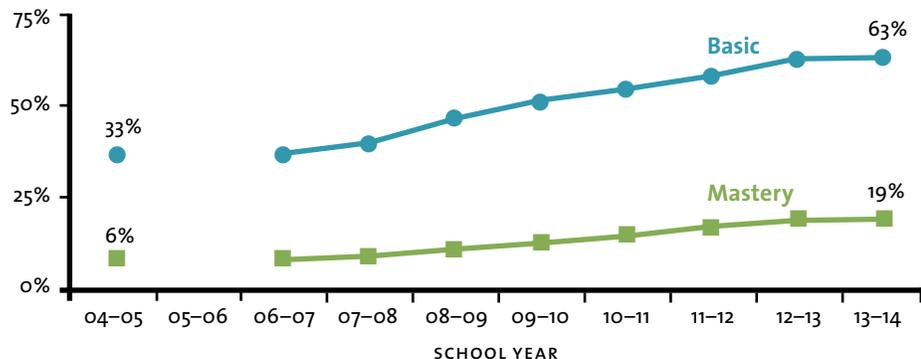
Graduation rates are up sharply.

54% → 73%
2004 2014

But much work remains

Less than 20 percent of students reach “Mastery” performance on state assessments.

Note: Percent of New Orleans students (grades 3–8) across all subjects. “Mastery” will be threshold for grade-level performance going forward and is equal to “Proficient” on the NAEP test.



1. Governance

The most important reform to come out of New Orleans—the one that enabled every other key change in the system—involves reimagining the district’s role. In the vast majority of schools city-wide, nonprofit charter school organizations now make core school-level decisions that affect teaching and learning, including curriculum, personnel, and instructional time.

With a smaller operational role, the Recovery School District (RSD) could focus on becoming an exceptional regulator for school quality and system equity. RSD has continually demonstrated the courage to close or transform failing schools, while simultaneously expanding top charter organizations. Very quickly, this strategy has resulted in fewer children in low-performing schools and more children attending the highest-quality public schools.³ RSD also tackled equity challenges, such as fair enrollment systems, in partnership with a

subset of charter schools that recognized they are “the system” now (see “Equity,” page 15).

No definitive answers have emerged on what long-term structure can protect the autonomy of schools while ensuring meaningful accountability for low academic performance. The Orleans Parish School Board is showing promise, but persistent worries about corruption dog the local board. And after arguing for nearly three years to select a new superintendent, the board does not seem to share a common vision that would enable it to make tough decisions around school turnaround and policies to promote equity. If our local district cannot adapt and embrace those principles without political interference, the New Orleans community would be better off navigating the current bifurcated system that has resulted in transformational academic gains.

LOUISIANA: RAISING THE BAR FOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Last year’s “good enough” is no longer good enough.

This maxim captures the fact that New Orleans public schools face an ever-increasing set of academic expectations. This trend began in 1999, when Louisiana first issued School Performance Scores (SPS) based on statewide assessments. It has gained momentum with repeated votes by Louisiana’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to raise performance standards over the past decade. The standards for acceptable academic results increased almost annually — jumping from an SPS of 30 (out of 200) to an SPS of 75 (out of 200) by 2013.

Charter renewal standards set by BESE have followed the same pattern. For years, Recovery School District charters with at least a “D” letter grade were eligible to continue operating — roughly above the 15th percentile statewide in SPS. But beginning in December 2015, charters signing their third operating agreement must show a “C” or better in academic performance — roughly above the 30th percentile statewide.⁴ The Orleans Parish School Board has put in place a more rigorous standard: Charters seeking renewal from the local board must demonstrate student performance at approximately the 40th percentile statewide.⁵

Successes

New Orleans has generated strong evidence that rebalancing power between schools and the central district office creates the conditions for academic growth.

✦ **Government is no longer bogged down with school operation.** Instead, it focuses on:

- Holding schools accountable for academic performance. Government intervention in low-performing schools has become the norm.
- Leading equity initiatives. Government implements policies to ensure fairness and equity for all students, regardless of their circumstances or background.

✦ **The Recovery School District (RSD) and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) oversee multiple pathways—each with a rigorous approval process—for charter school organizations and talented educators to operate schools in the new system.** Educators can convert district schools to charters, restart low-performing charter schools, or launch fresh-start charters.



GOVERNANCE: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE

93%

Percentage of New Orleans public school students enrolled in charter schools, the highest concentration of charters in the country.⁶

3:1

Ratio of New Orleanians who agree vs. disagree in 2015 that “Schools that are persistently rated ‘D’ should be turned over to a different operator to be restarted”—indicating broad support for RSD’s primary strategy.⁷

350

Approximate number of governing board members across all New Orleans charter schools. About half are black.⁸

Remaining work

The governance transformation is admittedly a work in progress and significant open questions remain.

✦ **No consensus on the long-term answer for public school governance.** New Orleans needs an innovative structure to channel public voice in ways that support autonomous schools, while also holding them accountable for performance and regulating for equity.

✦ **In the meantime, RSD and OPSB need to work in tandem—not in parallel.** The two districts need to cooperate on opening new schools, managing facilities and finances, and conducting oversight for all charters.

GOVERNANCE: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE

989

Days that OPSB went without a permanent superintendent until the hiring of Dr. Henderson Lewis Jr. in spring 2015.⁹

44%

Percentage of New Orleanians who believe schools should return to OPSB governance within the next 5 years. 44% also believe that schools should have the right to choose to return (as in current policy) or not return to OPSB at all.¹⁰

1 of 73

Over the past four years, eligible RSD charters have voted 73 times on the question of whether or not to move to OPSB governance. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School will become the first to transfer in fall 2015.



2. Schools

At the heart of New Orleans' academic progress over the past decade are dozens of autonomous, non-profit charter school organizations that serve 9 of 10 public school students in the city. This is a home-grown movement, and one that provides a diverse set of options for families.

School autonomy has enabled educators to develop innovative solutions to a range of challenges—from recruiting and hiring educators, to serving students with disabilities, to implementing the Common Core State Standards. Autonomous schools with talented people constantly look for ways to help students learn.

Although schools compete for educators and for students, they also collaborate on a wide range of issues. Charter organizations share curricular materials; principals visit one another's schools and provide feedback; and charter leaders sit at the table with the district and with community organizations to collaborate on developing equitable policies to ensure that every child is served well.

Successes

The city's strategy to allow quality, autonomous non-profits to run public schools laid the foundation for significant improvements in academic performance.

- ✦ **Diversity of school models and programming gives families real school choice.** Academic models and extracurricular programming vary widely across New Orleans—more so than most cities its size.
- ✦ **Homegrown, nonprofit charters make up the vast majority of schools.** Experienced local public school educators made up the initial set of charter conversions, and successive waves followed to serve a growing student population. Nonprofits, rather than for-profit firms, manage all but one charter school in the city today.
- ✦ **A “charter restart” strategy helped New Orleans eliminate failing schools.** The use of proven charter school organizations to restart low-performing schools has proved a swift and largely successful alternative to incremental approaches more commonly used to address persistently failing schools.
- ✦ **Charter schools and authorizers collaborate constructively.** New Orleans' governance structure demands deeper collaboration between policy-makers and charter school operators.

SCHOOLS: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE

19,191

Number of students in New Orleans schools above the 50th percentile statewide, according to SPS. This represents nearly 200% growth since 2009–10, when just 7,774 students attended schools above the state median.

13%

Percentage of New Orleans public school students attending a school in the lowest-performing decile in the state (i.e., SPS at 10th percentile or worse). This is down from 60% in 2004.

1.8

Increase in average ACT score across all public schools citywide since 2005. This catapulted New Orleans to the 46th percentile among Louisiana districts, compared with the 9th percentile in 2005.

Remaining work

Academic performance has improved significantly — particularly among the schools that were once among Louisiana’s lowest-performing campuses. Despite these improvements, far too many New Orleans charter schools are not yet adequately preparing students for college and careers. There is much work to be done.

✦ **New Orleans needs more exceptional charter operators to emerge out of the current school portfolio.** New Orleans expects ‘A’ and ‘B’ schools going forward. System leaders must determine what resources and supports schools will need to help both new and established charter school organizations reach this performance level. In particular, the system needs more excellent open-enrollment high schools.

✦ **New Orleans needs to cultivate great organizations to restart remaining low-performing schools.** In order for restarts to remain a viable mechanism for replacing underperforming schools in an environment of rising accountability standards, New Orleans needs a deeper bench of capable charter school organizations that can deliver an exceptional principal *and* a replication model that includes explicit systems for curriculum, staffing, school culture, and academic interventions.

✦ **New Orleans needs to strike a balance between innovation and replication.** New Orleans will continue to work through the tradeoffs between building financially sustainable charter school networks and cultivating innovative new organizations. Striking the right balance is no easy task.

SCHOOLS: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE

18%

Percentage of New Orleans public school students attending a school in top quartile of performance statewide (i.e., SPS at 75th percentile or better), up only marginally over the past decade.

0

Number of RSD schools that have earned an “A” letter grade from the state.

2 of 3

Fraction of New Orleanians who believe that high schools are preparing students for college at a level they describe as either “Fair” (43%) or “Poor” (23%).

3. Talent

Behind every headline figure of New Orleans' academic transformation, there are hundreds of talented, committed educators generating strong results.

Educators here choose their school based on the values, instructional approach, and leadership that best align with their vision of public education. The decentralized system empowers these teachers in unique ways—making the labor market for New Orleans educators analogous to that of lawyers, engineers, and other professionals rather than traditional district counterparts operating under collective bargaining agreements.

Government holds New Orleans' autonomous charter schools accountable for their academic results. In doing so, the system creates incentives for principals to hire effective veteran educators and new teachers from university and alternative programs that deliver strong candidates.

No single source of teachers has had a monopoly over the past decade—and larger citywide enrollment suggests that demand for teachers among New Orleans public schools will continue to grow. As efforts to grow residency programs embedded in charter school organizations build momentum, New Orleans has the opportunity to transform how teachers are prepared in this country, while tapping more novice educators with local roots to come into the profession.



UNTOLD STORY: VETERAN NEW ORLEANS TEACHERS CONTINUING THEIR SERVICE

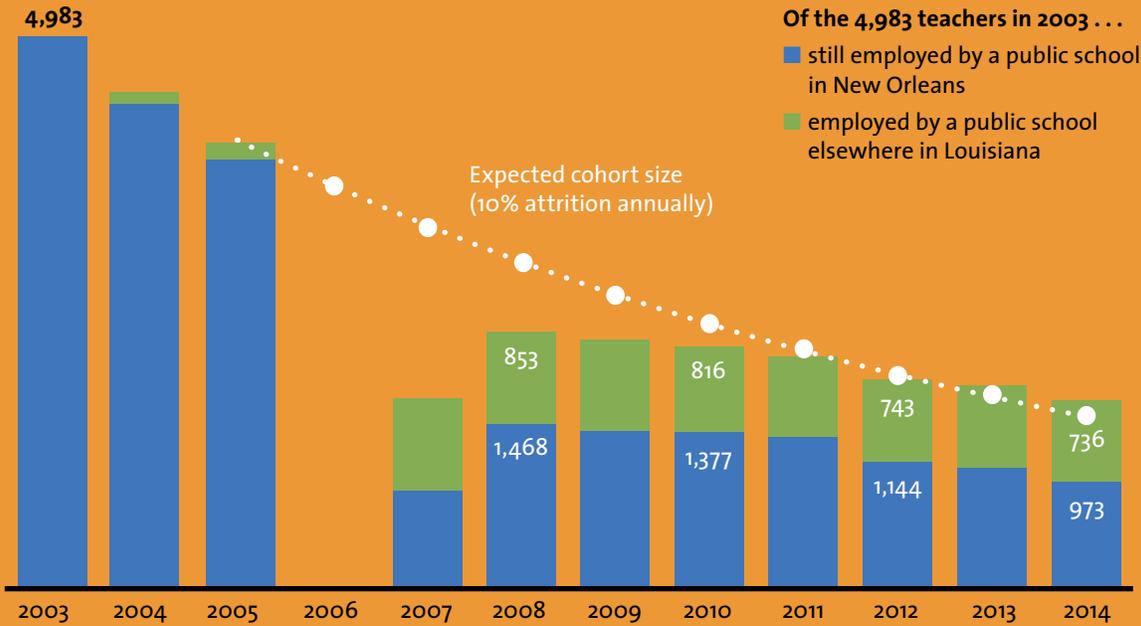
The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans analyzed state personnel files to determine the career path of educators who made up the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) teaching force in 2002–03.

Though not all of the city’s educators found a place in New Orleans’ decentralized system of schools, many did. And nearly 1,000 others returned to the classroom or took an administrative role in parishes elsewhere in Louisiana.

Since educators leave the classroom each year for a variety of personal and professional reasons, it’s useful to compare the actual number of veteran teachers continuing their service to the expected cohort size after normal attrition. Approximately 10 percent of

the teaching workforce left in both 2004 and 2005; the dashed white line in the chart extrapolates that rate into future years. By 2011, Louisiana public school employment among the 2003 NOPS teaching force had basically returned to the scale one would expect.

Veteran educators felt disrespected when OPSB, handcuffed by financial constraints in a near-empty city, released its entire teaching workforce. Fortunately, as the system recovered, schools across Louisiana began to put these educators’ expertise to use once again. No longer left stranded in the classroom by an unsupportive system, these individuals are in a position to help shape the future of education in New Orleans and elsewhere.



Successes

In a decentralized system, principals have autonomy and incentives to compete for talent—and they are fixated on creating work environments that attract, develop, and retain great teachers.

✦ **New Orleans educators are generating better student outcomes.** Teachers in New Orleans are significantly outpacing their peers elsewhere in Louisiana on statewide measures of academic growth. Despite serving a student population with enormous challenges, talented and well-supported educators in New Orleans are getting results.

✦ **Autonomy allowed diverse talent strategies to emerge in schools.**

- Innovative approaches to teacher preparation allow charter management organizations (CMOs) to provide hands-on training to novice

educators for an entire academic year before putting them in charge of their own classroom.

- Charter schools and networks have invested heavily in developing “middle leaders” (e.g., grade-level chairs, deans, assistant principals). Schools consider middle leaders critical to developing early-career teachers, retaining high-performing teachers, and expanding their impact.

✦ **New Orleans has unmatched “per capita” density of great nonprofits that identify and train educators.** New Orleans’ nonprofit community could stand toe-to-toe with much larger districts. Mission-driven organizations like Leading Educators, the Achievement Network, Match Education, TNTP, and Relay Graduate School of Education provide schools and teachers with options to meet their needs.

TALENT: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE

35%

Percentage of New Orleans teachers who generated student academic growth that placed them in the top 20% of teachers statewide, per state Compass data for 2013 and 2014.¹¹

50

Approximate number of public school employers in New Orleans, allowing teachers to find a professional environment that works for them.

>40%

Percentage of incoming Teach For America and teachNOLA educators in 2014 who identify as people of color, making the programs the largest pipelines of teachers of color in New Orleans.

Remaining work

Constantly improving the effectiveness of teachers and school principals is arguably New Orleans' most pressing citywide challenge in the coming years. Going forward, New Orleans will have to work hard to maintain a high bar for educator quality while simultaneously bringing more teachers into the public school system to serve the growing student population.

✦ **Develop new pipelines that give strong K-12 school operators a larger role in preparing their teachers.** CMOs in New Orleans are developing teacher residency programs to provide novice educators with hands-on training at key teaching skills. This work allows CMOs to improve the quality of their prospective teachers and develop skills and loyalty that help increase teacher retention.

✦ **Increase the diversity of the educator workforce.** Statewide, university teacher pipelines in Louisiana struggle to produce diverse cohorts

of educators. In New Orleans, decentralization presents an additional challenge: With no single human resources department tracking data and coordinating initiatives, efforts can falter. The city needs to ensure that the pipelines built to supply *effective educators* also cultivate *a diverse workforce*.

✦ **Provide support for educators who play a variety of roles in their schools.** The system needs to hone programs to build leadership capacity, cultivate teachers to fill hard-to-staff positions, and equip them to help students meet rising academic standards.

Can a system of autonomous schools provide better work environments, stronger professional supports, and more compelling pathways for advancement than a traditional school district? New Orleans will be a bellwether for the promise of this strategy.

TALENT: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE

50%

Percentage of New Orleans public school teachers identifying as black. This is down from 72% in 2004, and compares to 85% of public school students in the city.

900

NSNO's estimate for number of annual teacher vacancies citywide by 2020. As more families enroll in public schools in New Orleans, schools must have access to pipelines of effective, diverse teachers.

36%

Of the 350 first-year teachers that began their career in New Orleans public schools in fall 2009, just 127, or 36%, were still teaching at the end of the 2013–14 academic year.¹²

4. Equity

New Orleans has become a leader in meeting the needs of our country’s most vulnerable students and families. RSD officials concentrate on equity in the school system—partnering with OPSB when possible. Most RSD charter schools have willingly ceded some of their autonomy to ensure a level playing field across the city, collaborating with government to create fair policies and systems.

Innovative solutions to equity challenges have become a hallmark of the New Orleans system—from the centralized EnrollNOLA system that matches students to schools based on parents’ preferences, to the distribution of funds based on the unique needs of students with disabilities, to a unified discipline process that administers fair hearings and recommends expulsions based on a common standard.

New Orleans’ progress on equity complements its headline gains in student achievement: 80 percent

of families received one of their top three school choices through EnrollNOLA, and all participating schools “backfill” empty spots in upper grades. The city’s graduation rate for students with disabilities is 60 percent—far exceeding the statewide average of 43 percent. The suspension rate is lower than the pre-2005 figure, and the expulsion rate has been below the statewide average for three consecutive academic years.

New Orleans’ decentralized system has demonstrated the capacity to identify and decisively correct a range of equity challenges. Public education is about more than median achievement levels; it is also about ensuring that every child, no matter their circumstance or challenge, has the supports he or she needs to complete school and flourish as an adult. New Orleans is rapidly becoming a system that delivers on that promise.



Successes

✦ **New Orleans’ transition to a common enrollment system improved access and equity across the city.** EnrollNOLA is the New Orleans “equity story” in miniature: Over a few years, enrollment transformed from a short-coming to one of the system’s most important and equitable assets. The blind, uniform enrollment process makes applying to schools easier for parents and protects students from possible discrimination. Committed charter schools, nimble government, and community advocates drove this change.

✦ **A citywide process for managing discipline issues improved suspension and expulsion rates.** Creating and administering consistent expectations for students brought the expulsion

rate in New Orleans below the state average since 2012. New Orleans’ suspension rate is below where it stood in 2005.

✦ **New Orleans built capacity for serving students with disabilities.** RSD schools receive public funding for students with disabilities that is differentiated based on the type and intensity of services that each student needs. This intuitive funding structure is extremely rare nationwide—and provides an essential complement to school autonomy. Significant improvements in graduation rates indicate that program quality has increased dramatically since 2005.

EQUITY: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE

84%

Percent of school seats in 2014–15 filled via EnrollNOLA, the city’s centralized school enrollment office.¹³

60%

Class of 2014 graduation rate for students with disabilities across all New Orleans public schools. This is 17 points better than the state.¹⁴

3
YEARS

Consecutive years in which expulsion rate for public schools in New Orleans has been lower than state average.

WHO SERVES STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The chart below highlights how special education enrollment has changed since 2008.¹⁵

Students with disabilities as a percent of total student enrollment, 2008–14



- ▲ RSD direct-run schools (in the years they operated) had a special education (SPED) enrollment rate between 10 and 12 percent of students.
- RSD charters have dramatically increased their SPED enrollment, moving from 7 percent of students with disabilities to 12.5 percent.
- ◆ The 6 OPSB network schools also serve a higher percentage of students with disabilities today.
- OPSB charters continue to serve a small share of students with disabilities. In 2014–15, OPSB charters included 10 open-enrollment and 4 selective-admissions programs. On average, students with disabilities accounted for only 6.5 percent of the students enrolled at these schools—far below the city and state averages of 11 percent.

What produced this lopsided distribution? Likely a combination of factors, including:

- OPSB charters enrolled fewer students with disabilities from the start. In 2004–05, the subset of higher-performing schools that remained with OPSB served a student population that included only 5 percent students with disabilities. Future RSD schools served 12 percent students with disabilities in 2004–05.¹⁶
- With the exception of newly-transferred Dr. M.L.K. Charter School, all OPSB charter and network schools fall under a single local education agency (LEA). Each RSD charter is its own LEA. The different bureaucratic structures have implications for federal mandates, funding, and autonomy.
- Unlike RSD, OPSB does not currently differentiate per-pupil funding to account for the higher cost to serve students with disabilities. Recent state legislation will require all charter schools in New Orleans to do so in the coming years.
- EnrollNOLA ensures equal access for all students, regardless of disability. In 2014, only 25 percent of the seats in OPSB charters were allocated via EnrollNOLA. For the remaining seats, individual charter schools ran their own enrollment processes designed in accordance with local, state, and federal regulations.

Remaining work

Beyond improvements to specific equity issues, New Orleans needs to create space where trust and collaboration are the primary mechanisms to move forward on these challenges. Partnership—not litigation—will enable the New Orleans system to work through remaining challenges and create excellence for all students.

✦ **Complete the build-out of EnrollNOLA.**

Implementation of the common enrollment system will not be complete until all schools in the city participate. All schools must participate. Full stop.

✦ **Improve supports to families trying to navigate enrollment.** Changes to the process and timeline, shifts in the school portfolio, and the inherent stress of selecting a school from among 80 options heap pressure onto families trying to navigate a unique and complex system in New Orleans. New Orleans must continue to improve its enrollment processes and provide better information and resources for families making choices in this system.

✦ **Maintain focus on students with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.** New Orleans needs to forge joint ownership across RSD and OPSB for serving students with disabilities—RSD charters currently serve

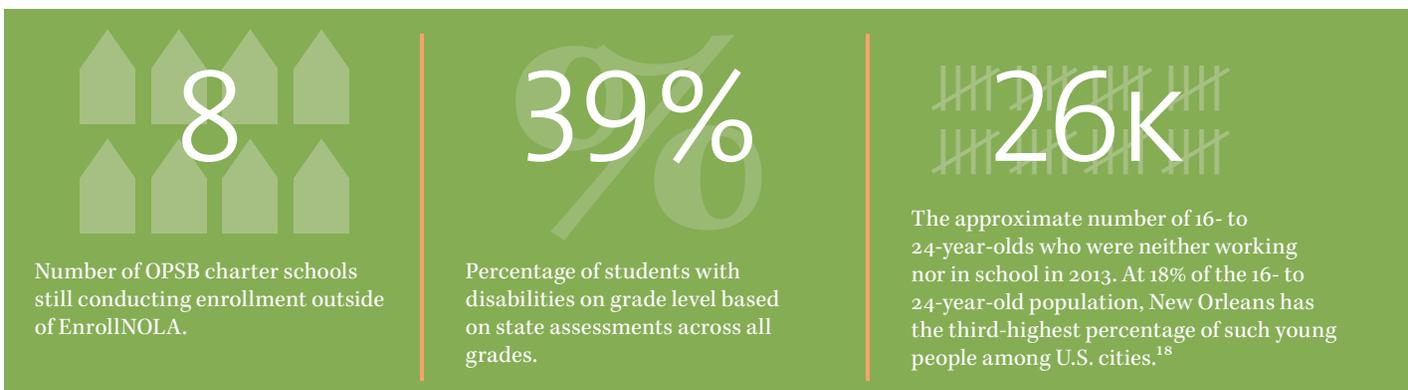
students with disabilities at twice the rate of their OPSB counterparts. The city must use school autonomy and collaboration to build the country’s most effective educator workforce to serve these students.

✦ **Establish discipline policies that integrate, rather than marginalize, vulnerable populations.** Discipline policies must support a safe and supportive learning environment while not interrupting the academic progress of students who need more support.

✦ **Develop systems to connect decentralized schools with decentralized mental health supports.** Students in New Orleans suffer from rates of depression and post-traumatic stress at between four and eight times the national rate.¹⁷ The districts must work more closely with schools and city and state governments to address the massive unmet mental health needs among New Orleans students.

New Orleans’ progress on the equity front is not complete. But, as a case study for how a decentralized system can coordinate and innovate, New Orleans stands out as a hopeful example of how other cities could address public education’s greatest challenges.

EQUITY: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE



5. Community

Our community engages in unprecedented ways in public education in New Orleans. Families choose schools for their children in the absence of default neighborhood options. Nearly 400 citizens representing every corner of the city serve as volunteer charter board members. Community organizations provide resources and supports to institutions that have served students for decades and to new public schools that have emerged in recent years. And polling data indicate strong support for key policy reforms—charters, school choice, and accountability for low performance.

Yet after a decade of unprecedented growth and irrefutable evidence that schools are getting better, many in our community remain frustrated with how reform in New Orleans happened, how decisions are made, and who makes those decisions. There is a pervasive feeling, especially within many black communities, that reform has happened “to” and not “with” the students and families served by New Orleans schools. This leads some to ask the question, “Was it worth it?”

Our answer is definitive: Yes. Student outcomes must be the lens through which we judge reforms. Our students are, without question, better off than a decade ago. But the frustration many feel is real and must be heard, and acknowledged, and addressed. If New Orleans does not reconcile our city’s perennial issues—particularly those steeped in race and class—we will remain mired in the same arguments for another decade. These disputes will continue to drain energy from our shared focus: ensuring that every child in New Orleans is set up for a great life.

Our system has repeatedly demonstrated that it can identify and fix seemingly intractable problems. It’s time we recognize our issues on community voice, and address them.



Successes

Despite persistent difficulties in building trust and shared ownership in school system reforms, successes continue to build momentum in New Orleans.

✦ **Data from public polls point to an encouraging level of public support for New Orleans' core education reforms.**

- **Charter schools:** 59 percent agree that charters have improved public education; 18 percent disagreed.
- **Citywide choice:** 72 percent support open enrollment; 23 percent favor a return to geographic assignment.

- **Accountability:** 59 percent think that schools earning a “D” or “F” letter grade should be turned over to a different school operator; 20 percent disagreed.²²

✦ **Community participation is producing real change in the system.** Constructive engagement with advocates and school communities has sparked solutions to challenges such as student enrollment and fair citywide systems for student discipline. In 2014, RSD responded to a long-standing demand by bringing a range of stakeholders—including parents, community-based organizations, and others—into the decision-making process on matching charter operators to school buildings, yielding significantly smoother transitions than in the past.

COMMUNITY: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE

11:1

Ratio of parents who are satisfied with the “quality and responsiveness of schools” (versus those who are not), based on 500 parent interviews conducted by CRPE in 2014.¹⁹

91%

Percentage of New Orleans precincts that supported a December 2014 millage vote, which was framed by prominent critics as a referendum on RSD and reform efforts.²⁰

50

Rank of New Orleans population among U.S. cities in 2014, returning the city to the list of America’s 50 most-populous cities for the first time since Hurricane Katrina.²¹

Remaining work

The city lacks a “shared vision.” As RSD Deputy Superintendent of External Affairs Dana Peterson pointed out, “People need an opportunity to collectively envision what should be at the end of the path. What problem are we solving, what do we value, and how do we accomplish it?”²³ On these questions, education leaders must offer a vision, while establishing mechanisms for citizens to help inform that vision. But to do that, New Orleans needs to nurture forms of community engagement that reflect today’s decentralized system of schools.

✦ **Broaden community engagement in system-wide reforms.** Key system-level strategies and decisions—such as school siting decisions, new school creation, and enrollment processes—need formal roles for a range of voices to participate. New Orleans has made progress here, but needs to continue to provide opportunities for citizens to inform the direction of the system.

✦ **Strengthen school-community relationships in a system of non-neighborhood schools.** Most schools now serve student populations

from dozens of neighborhoods. Schools need to find ways to partner with neighborhood groups and churches and work alongside them to serve all students.

✦ **Create meaningful and actionable measures of community support.** Education leaders set policies and implement new practices based on data, and public schools are held accountable for accepted measures of academic performance. New Orleans should look to adopt comprehensive measures of community support as well.

Finally, while the bifurcated state of governance has yielded unprecedented academic gains, the current structure for managing New Orleans public schools seems untenable in the long term. The ongoing sustainability of the system’s transformation will require a unified system with a more substantive local voice in system governance.

COMMUNITY: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE

81

Miles from downtown New Orleans to the Claiborne Building in Baton Rouge, where the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education conducts most state board meetings. (BESE’s “Committee of the Whole” also meets in New Orleans several times each year to discuss RSD action items.)

9 YRS

Number of years that passed before RSD formalized community participation in its “matching” process to select operators for school facilities. Efforts were inconsistent before 2014.

7,000

Approximate number of students whose school will move into a different facility in summer 2015. Instability throughout the massive FEMA-funded rebuilding program has made sustained engagement between schools, neighborhoods, and families difficult.

6. Funders

Unlike most traditional school systems, New Orleans allocates the vast majority of public education dollars directly to schools. This structure helps to ensure that schools have autonomy and flexibility to meet their students' academic needs.

Private philanthropy and several major federal grants have supplemented core public funds for the past decade. Though critical to the success of this time, these sources represent about 6 percent of the roughly \$5 billion in local, state, and federal per-pupil spending in New Orleans since 2005.

Nonprofit startup organizations and new charter schools used these resources to begin their work in the city's decentralized system. Philanthropy and federal grants also provided essential support for the ongoing work of talent organizations, particularly pipelines of new teachers for a rapidly growing system of schools.

Ultimately, with this new system New Orleans will need public funding to drive new school creation and talent support. In the interim, continued philanthropic support will ensure that New Orleans maintains its momentum.

Successes

- ✦ **Funding enabled a reform strategy driven by innovative nonprofits.** New Orleans attracts investments from a variety of sources to nurture new nonprofits that fill system gaps and expand educational options for families.
- ✦ **Data-driven decision-making.** The use of student performance data to guide grant-making has permeated the New Orleans system.
- ✦ **Several promising examples exist of state funding to support key New Orleans priorities.** State funding began to break new ground in the past two years, filling roles assumed by philanthropy and the federal government for much of the past decade. For example, the Louisiana Department of Education has funded "Believe & Prepare" efforts in traditional districts and charter schools as they launch innovative partnerships to prepare novice educators to step into the classroom.

FUNDERS: NUMBERS TO CELEBRATE



Remaining work

✦ **Support key system priorities with recurring public dollars.** Changes to governance ought to be accompanied by changes in public finance. In other words, resource allocation should reflect how education is delivered in the new system—by autonomous nonprofits rather than a central district office. More recurring public dollars are needed to support key system priorities such as entrepreneurship and talent. These drive progress in a decentralized system.

✦ **Maintain strong philanthropic partnerships to support New Orleans public schools.** Philanthropic funders have helped galvanize a diverse set of nonprofits behind a common mission in New Orleans. These partnerships must remain strong if New Orleans hopes to continue its academic transformation.

FUNDERS: NUMBERS TO MOTIVATE

90%

Percent increase in number of charter schools in operation across the U.S. between 2005 and 2014 — many of whom look to the same philanthropic sources and federal grants to support their work.²⁶

\$2
MILLION

Total funding allocated by LDOE since 2014 through *Believe & Prepare*. For a statewide initiative, the amount is low. New Orleans school operators benefit from these start-up resources to develop innovative teacher pipeline programs with higher education partners.

\$1.6 BILLION

Total Louisiana budget deficit that had to be addressed in 2015 legislative session.²⁷ With state finances in disarray, New Orleans is unlikely to benefit from additional spending on entrepreneurship, talent development, and other key system priorities.

IS \$250 MILLION A MASSIVE SUM OR A DROP IN THE BUCKET?

On one hand, \$250 million is a staggering amount of support for public schools in a medium-size city. Remember that New Orleans public schools serve fewer than 50,000 students today. The city does not rank among the top 100 largest school districts in the United States.²⁸

On the other, operational spending by New Orleans schools—from local, state, and federal funding—approached \$5 billion over the past decade.²⁹ Public school systems require large outlays of public dollars.

If our estimate of \$250 million is roughly correct, that would translate into approximately \$715 in additional annual support for each New Orleans public school student, or less than 6 percent of total annual spending.³⁰ Annual expenditures approached \$12,000 per pupil in New Orleans 2013–14.³¹

New Orleans has certainly benefited from sustained support from philanthropy and federal grants—but core public dollars constitute the vast majority of K–12 spending in the city. We shouldn't overlook that fact.

Conclusion

This report shows that something remarkable is happening in New Orleans. An innovative system has generated substantial gains on state tests. ACT results in our public schools are closing stubborn gaps with students elsewhere in the country. New Orleans educators are helping more kids over the finish line in high school and onto college campuses. This is real progress.

Improvements like these do not happen without citywide investment in the success of its young people. New Orleans is starting to treat all kids as “our kids.” We are building a system to serve every child.

But much work remains. Test scores and high school diplomas are signposts along the way—critical signposts, but signposts nonetheless. The destination is a just community, led by graduates of New Orleans public schools who are prepared to uplift neighborhoods and solve inequities across New Orleans: in housing, healthcare, economic development, and criminal justice.

In 2025, we hope to celebrate a public school system that has kept the positive momentum over a second decade of reform:

In Governance: As New Orleans navigates toward a unified governance system, public officials remain focused on two core activities: evaluating schools’ academic quality, and creating an equitable, fair system for all families. If officials commit to these principles, more parents will have the opportunity to find an excellent school for their children.

In Schools: Government should leave the rest to New Orleans’ autonomous schools: hiring and developing educators, shaping curriculum, and establishing vibrant school environments. Parents will look to existing charter schools and new organizations to personalize instruction for their children and to create school environments that are racially and socioeconomically diverse. After high school, students will experience seamless transitions to post-secondary options—including four-year college, two-year college, or right into the workplace.

In Talent: As more families enroll in public schools in New Orleans, schools need access to many sources of teachers who help students learn. Today’s New Orleans public school graduates become tomorrow’s New Orleans public school teachers. Higher education, K–12 schools, and the nonprofit community are positioned to reinvent teacher preparation if they have the resources and relationships to form promising new partnerships.

In Equity: For every health, social, and economic challenge faced by students and their families, public schools are well-equipped to connect New Orleanians to the services they need. Students who have disconnected from the system—or seem to be heading in that direction—get the hands-on support that they need to thrive.

In Community: Leaders in the education system, community groups, advocacy organizations, government, and citizens approach the task of solving problems with a sense of unity and shared purpose on behalf of the students of New Orleans.

In Funders: Lawmakers and taxpayers express their deep belief in the promise of New Orleans students by funding initiatives that are integral to the success of autonomous schools in high-needs communities—namely, launching effective new nonprofits and fueling ongoing talent priorities such as teacher pipelines and educator development.

Our educators are getting to the heart of the challenges faced by young people in New Orleans. Their innovation and commitment will make New Orleans a more just community in the future. We have to keep pushing.

The students of New Orleans deserve nothing less than the country’s first great urban public school system. That is our goal.

2025 will be here before we know it.

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stabilized. To calculate \$5 billion, we multiply annual per-pupil operating expenditures by total citywide enrollment.

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