

Greater New Orlear

'We are ready' for the new New Orleans school system: Editorial



Orleans Parish school superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr. talks about his plan for his first 180 days as he addresses the Bureau of Government Research breakfast briefing at the Pan American Life Center on April 15, 2015. (Michael DeMocker, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)



By **The Editorial Board, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune**

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It will take hard work to reunify New Orleans public schools by July 2018, but the **Orleans Parish School Board** took a major step last week. The board unanimously **approved a transition plan** Aug. 30 that lays out how charter schools from the state-operated Recovery School District will be blended into the city's school system.

The vote signifies the progress made in the 11 years since Hurricane Katrina and the levee breaches, when the Legislature took the vast majority of city schools away from the School Board to be run by the state.

Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr., who will lead the combined system, summed up the sentiments of many New Orleanians. "We are ready," he said.

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"Just think how far we have come," he added.



6 facts about the New Orleans school unification plan

The New Orleans school landscape has been transformed since the disaster. The School Board was allowed to keep only the highest-performing schools after Katrina. The vast majority were turned over to **the RSD** and have been reinvented as independent charters.

While some students and some schools are still behind academically, the progress has been dramatic.

Only 31 percent of city students scored proficient or above on state tests in 2004, according to statistics compiled by Educate Now. That number had risen to 62 percent in 2014.

The graduation rate in New Orleans climbed from 54 percent in 2004 to 75 percent in 2015, the Educate Now report shows. Over that decade, average ACT scores increased from 17.0 to 18.8 on the 36-point test. That improvement came even though far more students are taking the college entrance exam. Only 60 percent of New Orleans students took the ACT in 2005 compared with 86 percent in 2015.

The number of New Orleans public school students enrolled in college grew dramatically as well, from only 37 percent in 2004 to 63 percent in 2015. The number of students eligible for TOPS scholarships increased from only 25 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2015.

Superintendent Lewis promised the new combined system would be nothing like the bloated, dysfunctional one that existed before Katrina.

The central administrative office will be lean and efficient, he said, to ensure that money gets to schools. The district will "make hard, informed decisions," based on data. That will include closing schools when needed, he said. The public will be able to see how money is being spent and have "confidence in the way the district uses funds," he said.

"We want you to hold us accountable," he said.

That is one of the benefits of the return of control to OPSB. New Orleanians will be able to go to their elected School Board members with concerns again.

New Orleans' Katrina school takeover to end

Thursday's vote closes a chapter in the city's history

Lawmakers approved the return of recovery schools to the OPSB earlier this summer. Senate Bill 432 safeguarded charter schools' independence, forbidding the School Board from interfering in personnel, collective bargaining, contracts, curriculum and other matters.

The legislation set up an advisory committee to come up with the transition plan. That group held multiple public meetings this summer to get New Orleanians to help refine the system's guiding principles.

Those include: setting high standards; continuing progress made over the past 11 years; providing families diverse school options and a fair enrollment process; ensuring equity for all students; empowering schools to make instructional decisions, and giving the community information on how money is being used and how schools are performing.

If the system's leaders stick to those principles, New Orleans children will benefit. The improvements in achievement since Katrina should be just the beginning.

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