



United Teachers of New Orleans
4650 Paris Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70122
504/304-2160
www.utno.org



Louisiana Federation of Teachers
9623 Brookline Avenue
Baton Rouge, LA 70809
225/923-1037
http://la.aft.org/



American Federation of Teachers
555 New Jersey Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202/879-4400
www.aft.org

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Contact:
Christian Roselund, UTNO
504/304-2160
croselund@utno.org

TOO SOON TO CELEBRATE IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS

Post-Katrina school system still hindered by race/class divide and struggles to serve special needs students

NEW ORLEANS—A close look at student achievement patterns in New Orleans shows a school system that is increasingly segregated by race, class and academic performance, according to an analysis of test scores and other student data released today by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) and United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO).

The report, “Reading, Writing and Reality Check: An Early Assessment of Student Achievement in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” finds that, under the post-Katrina system, public schools that already were deeply divided by race, class and academic status appear to be more divided than ever. Also, a large drop in the reported number of special education students in New Orleans suggests that many of these children have been reclassified since the storm, and may not be receiving the services they are entitled to under federal law.

Because about half of the schools have enrollment caps and selective admission criteria, and significant changes in student population and staff has affected virtually every school, caution should be used when interpreting changes in the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) scores from 2005 to 2007, the report says.

“This modern-day segregation of schools is hurting the students who rely most on public education. The schools in New Orleans are not living up to their obligation to provide every child with a high-quality education,” said UTNO president Dr. Brenda Mitchell. “Some children can’t attend schools close to their homes because of admission barriers, and the needs of special education students are being overlooked.”

“Reality Check” contends that claims of overall progress in New Orleans’ public schools are not supported by data. In fact, math and English scores have dropped, and the gap between New Orleans and the state average has grown. “It’s way too soon to celebrate any gains in academic achievement,” said Mitchell.

Other key findings from the report:

- From 2005 to 2007, the gap between the average LEAP score for New Orleans schools and the state average increased by 6 percentage points to 10 percentage points, depending on the subject and grade level.

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- Of the charter schools that had fourth-grade test data available for 2005-07, 10 improved in both math and reading, four showed improvement in only one subject, and 16 schools posted lower scores in both subjects for the period.
- Since the state takeover, students classified as having special needs dropped from just under 10 percent to 6.2 percent. This sharp drop raises concerns that these children either are being discouraged from enrolling or are being misclassified.
- Recovery School District (RSD) charter schools showed no improvement in the fourth grade, but demonstrated LEAP gains in the eighth grade.(Eighth-grade enrollment dropped 50 percent between 2005 and 2007.)
- Three of the four RSD charters that were most successful in improving student achievement after Katrina had some of the highest percentages of veteran New Orleans teachers. The same is true for the most successful Algiers charter schools.

Not surprisingly, the schools with selective admissions that converted to charter status after Katrina scored the highest in both 2005 and 2007. “The data in this report confirm what we’ve been saying all along. Any school that is allowed to hand-pick students and teachers will show higher levels of achievement,” said LFT president Steve Monaghan, “While some schools are doing a good job of educating students, too many of our children are still being shortchanged by this system.”

“Reality Check” calls for a close monitoring of the New Orleans school takeover experiment, and makes a number of recommendations for assessing progress and better serving at-risk student populations, including:

- Better recognition of the impact that teacher quality, parental involvement and other critical factors have on student achievement;
- Closely monitoring the performance of schools that serve the most vulnerable students;
- Factoring in major structural and demographic changes in New Orleans when assessing student achievement; and
- Requiring school officials to provide a full accounting of students with special needs and to address those needs.

“This report should be a bright red flag to elected officials, the school board, the RSD and other agencies. Any stakeholder in education should be alarmed at the growing divide among the students of New Orleans. We hope to sit down with all of these agencies to confront these issues honestly and constructively,” UTNO’s Mitchell said.

“Reading, Writing and Reality Check: An Early Assessment of Student Achievement in Post-Katrina New Orleans” can be downloaded at www.aft.org, www.la.aft.org or www.utno.org.

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