



A Union of Professionals

Positive Impact from New Orleans Post-Katrina Reforms or Misleading Accountability Metrics?

Evidence supporting the New Orleans “miracle” relies on misleading accountability data, such as passing or proficiency rates determined by subjectively set cut scores, rather than actual test scores and research-based measures of school effectiveness, such as value-added and other quasi-experimental research designs. A pattern of redefining Louisiana’s District Performance Scores (DPS) and School Performance Scores (SPS), selectively omitting schools from accountability calculations in New Orleans and changing cut scores to redefine success and failure in the A-F grading system suggest the claims of dramatic improvement stem from changing the definitions of “success” and “failure” rather than research-based evidence of successful reform.

- **Growth in proficiency measures are poor predictors of school effectiveness.** As predicted by the research literature, change in school proficiency is not equivalent to value added.¹ According to one research study, New Orleans schools with big proficiency gains were no more effective—based on value-added metrics—than schools with low growth in proficiency rates. Some schools with little proficiency growth had high value-added scores.² Another research study, this time of school closures in New Orleans since 2010 by Stanford researchers, found that before closing, “learning gains” for students in the closed schools were actually similar to comparable Recovery School District (RSD) students even though their schools were labeled chronically failing by accountability metrics.³
- **Academic performance in New Orleans is inflated due to changes to the grading system.** The standard used to grade charter schools is substantially lower today than the standard used to take over schools in Orleans Parish in November 2005. After the cut point for failure was raised from an SPS of 60 to 87.4 on a scale of 200 in 2005, it was lowered back to a SPS of 60 in 2007 (the SPS calculation was suspended during the year following the hurricane). It currently stands at 50 on a scale of 150, with “bonus points” sometimes added to the final score. In 2013, however, cut scores for the A-F grading system were also lowered. Louisiana raised the grade for itself from a C under the old grading system to a B under the new grading system. The RSD increased from a D under the old system to a C.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.6 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

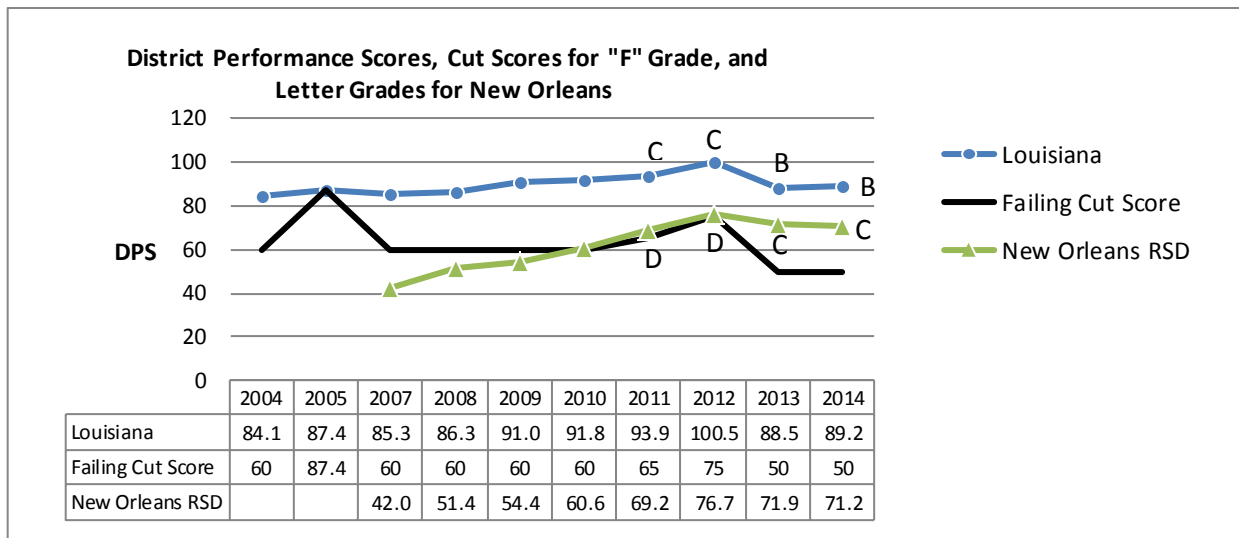
Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Lorretta Johnson
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Mary Cathryn Ricker
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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





- Omitted schools inflated RSD performance metrics.** Before Katrina, all schools were held accountable. By 2013, however, nearly one in three RSD schools (20 of 67) was not assigned a letter grade due to a policy whereby schools that were being closed, converted to charter schools or switching to other charter school operators are not graded. In 2014, this problem was less significant, because letter grades were calculated for non-charter schools that closed at the end of the year. However, seven of the 62 RSD schools—most of which were low-scoring charters in various stages of closing or switching operators—still had no letter grades.⁴
- Test-driven accountability spurs cheating.** The state took over and operates the RSD, and it also investigates cheating on tests across the state. This raises questions about conflicts of interest regarding cheating investigations in New Orleans. In 2007-08, the state determined that half of the schools in the RSD had site violations of testing procedures, and in the following year, more than a third were cited for violations.⁵ Unusual gains in test scores, especially if followed by unusual losses, should trigger a cheating probe. Patterns of unusual gains and losses in several RSD schools have been found in past years.⁶ In a recent example, RSD direct-run Habans Elementary gained more SPS points in 2013 than any other school in New Orleans.⁷ Under its new charter school operator in 2014, the school's SPS fell 46 points. In another situation meriting review for cheating, Capdau charter school rose 41 SPS points in 2014, raising its letter grade from an "F" to a "B."

When compared with other districts in the state, the RSD is performing at or near the bottom.

- New Orleans takeover targeted the bottom 50 percent, not the bottom 5 percent.** Following Hurricane Katrina, all New Orleans schools with an SPS score *below the state average* were taken over and forced into the RSD. New Orleans does not provide a model for states and cities looking for a turnaround strategy for its *failing* schools, usually defined as the "bottom 5 percent."
- In 2014, almost all of the RSD schools were still failing.** Almost all schools in the RSD were still in the bottom 50 percent and therefore failing by post-Katrina standards. In 2014, nine years after the takeover, only three of 62 RSD schools surpassed the 2014 state average SPS of 89.2.⁸

- **The District Performance Score for the RSD declined in 2014.** The Louisiana average DPS improved by 0.7 points (on a 150-point scale) but the mostly charter RSD declined by 0.7 points, increasing the gap with the state by 1.4 points.⁹ OPSB charter and non-charter schools combined improved by 1.2 DPS points.¹⁰
- **In spite of recent manipulations to the A-F school grading system, most schools in the RSD still perform poorly.** The letter grades the Louisiana Department of Education assigned to RSD's portfolio of schools in 2014 demonstrate the continued low level of academic performance of the takeover schools as measured by the accountability system. Among the 62 RSD schools, 56 percent were assigned a letter grade of D or F compared with 28 percent of Louisiana schools.¹¹ Even though a majority of RSD schools earned a grade of D or F, the RSD itself obtained a grade of C" according to the state.
- **Student achievement in the RSD still ranks near the bottom among the other parishes in the state.** In 2014, the RSD ranked above only six small rural parishes.¹²

An important part of claims about the New Orleans miracle is that New Orleans leads both the state and nation in graduation rates. However, recent data tell a different story.

- **High school graduation rate tumbled in 2013.** The RSD graduation rate fell by 8 percentage points in 2013.¹³ Only one parish, having just a single high school, had a lower graduation rate than the RSD's 59.5 percent. New Orleans as a whole (OPSB and RSD) is further away from the state average in 2014 than in 2010. Compared with the other schools in New Orleans and in the state, it is clear that the RSD is still struggling to graduate its students.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
OPSB	90.3	93.8	89.3	89.3	89.0
RSD	49.7	58.8	67.7	59.5	61.1
OPSB and RSD	68.8	76.5	77.8	72.8	72.7
Louisiana	67.2	71.4	72.3	73.5	74.6

- **Problems with the graduation rate calculations in post-hurricane New Orleans.** The federally required cohort graduation rate measures the percentage of ninth-grade students in a particular year who receive a standard diploma four years later. For most high schools in the United States, the cohort graduation rate is a meaningful measure, but in New Orleans the cohort method probably inflated graduation rates in 2011 and 2012. Following Hurricane Katrina, many New Orleans students dropped out before high school and never enrolled in the ninth-grade cohort. More than 20 percent of the RSD's eighth-graders were 16 or older, and the RSD served many of its older eighth-graders in "8.5" programs instead of ninth grade.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Di Carlo, Matthew. "If Your Evidence Is Changes In Proficiency Rates, You Probably Don't Have Much Evidence." Shanker Blog, March 22, 2012. <http://shankerblog.org/?p=5470>.

² Richard Welsh, Andrew McEachin, and Dominic Brewer. "Rewarding Growth or Achievement? Assessing the Eligibility Criteria of the Recovery School District Return Policy." Paper presented at the 2013 Conference of the Association for Education Finance and Policy, New Orleans, 2013.

³ CREDO. "New Schools for New Orleans Year 2 Report," Hoover Institution, Stanford University, October 2013.

⁴ Gregory enrolled students but was not listed in the accountability data. Four charter schools received a grade of "T" (for transition) for two years in a row: Crescent Leadership Academy, John McDonogh High School, Joseph A. Craig Charter and McDonogh 42 Charter. Two new schools in 2013-14 were graded "T": ReNEW Schaumburg and Crocker College Prep.

⁵ Mikhail Zinshteyn. "Louisiana Skipped Key Standardized Testing Analysis in 2009-2010,Cites Budget Woes." *Washington Independent*, Sept. 12, 2011.

⁶ Charles Hatfield. "Annual Percent Proficiency Changes in ELA by RSD Schools and Grade Levels on iLEAP and LEAP," New Orleans: Research on Reforms, 2011.

⁷ Danielle Dreilinger, "The Turnaround Artist: One Principal, Two Enormous Test Score Gains and Many Questions," *Times-Picayune*, Dec.12, 2014.

⁸ Walker High School (89.7), KIPP Central City (95.2), and Behrman (93.3). Capdau omitted due to cheating. Louisiana Department of Education, 2014 District Performance Scores/Letter Grades.

⁹ Louisiana Department of Education, 2014 District Performance Scores/Letter Grades.

¹⁰ The state Common Core transition tests in 2013 and 2014 were not more difficult than in previous years, as sometimes mistakenly reported, due to statistical procedures that equated test difficulty.

¹¹ Schools with a "T" grade (for transition) are given the letter grade corresponding to their SPS.

¹² Does not include Orleans Parish. Parishes with a lower DPS were Union Parish (five schools), Red River Parish (five schools), Morehouse Parish (10 schools), St. Helena Parish (two schools), Madison Parish (four schools) and Claiborne Parish (six schools).

¹³ Louisiana Department of Education, 2014 District and State Graduation Rates (2001 to 2013).

¹⁴ Sarah Carr. "Older Students Pose Unique Challenges for Teachers, Families," *Times-Picayune*, May 17, 2010.