



*A Union of Professionals*

## The Track Record of the New Orleans Schools after Katrina

On Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the nation's Gulf Coast. Failures in the levees protecting New Orleans sent floodwaters cascading across most of the city, surging into homes, washing away cars and claiming the lives of many residents. Two months after Katrina, when other districts and states were already reopening their public schools and welcoming their evacuee students and teachers, another storm hit New Orleans. But this storm was man-made when the Louisiana Legislature passed the New Orleans school takeover legislation. Like Katrina, it happened quickly. Like Katrina, its impact is still being felt.

In November 2005, barely two months after Katrina, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco called a special legislative session leading to the passage of Act 35, which changed the definition of a “failing” school for Orleans Parish, but not for other parishes. The definition of a “failing” school changed from a District Performance Score (DPS) below 60 (on a scale of 200) to a DPS of 87.4, just below the state average. In effect, New Orleans schools that ranked in the bottom 50 percent of the state were labeled as “failing.” This allowed the state-run Recovery School District, which existed prior to Hurricane Katrina, to assume control of 107 of 128 public schools in Orleans Parish.<sup>1</sup> Without Act 35, the state would have assumed control of just 13 additional failing schools.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to the dominant narrative, Act 35 did not “charterize” all schools or create a “portfolio district.”<sup>3</sup> For a couple of years after the storm, less than half of the students in RSD schools were enrolled in charter schools; and the RSD did not go all charter until 2014-15. The portfolio model was not realized until New Orleans implemented the OneApp centralized enrollment and lottery system for the 2012-13 school year. Sheltered from public input and scrutiny, the reform agenda that followed the takeover was shaped from outside New Orleans—by think tanks, foundations, corporate education reformers and entrepreneurs.

Schools in New Orleans are divided into two categories:

- **Orleans Parish School Board schools (OPSB)**—are schools with a School Performance Score (SPS) above the state average in 2005 that remained under the jurisdiction of the local parish school board. A majority of these are exam schools and magnet schools that converted to charter school status just days after Hurricane Katrina. It was the only way they were allowed to reopen quickly. Although the conversions are called charter schools, they do not admit students by lottery and do not participate in the common application system. The few OPSB schools that did not convert to charter status have phased out pre-Katrina selectivity and now admit students largely by lottery.

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- **Recovery School District (RSD) schools**—are schools taken over by the state for scoring below the state average SPS in 2005. Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, the RSD operated non-charter schools, referred to as “direct-run schools,” to quickly accommodate thousands of returning evacuee students when the fledgling charter school operators failed to go to scale quickly. These direct-run schools never had neighborhood attendance zones even though charter school advocates, the media and many researchers cast them as “traditional public schools.” Students were admitted by principals or by the assignment of central authorities rather than lottery or neighborhood attendance zones. For many years, RSD charter schools conducted their own lotteries and had their own admissions procedures, often with significant barriers to entry. By the 2014-15 school year, all of the RSD’s direct-run schools had been closed regardless of their academic performance.

Advocates of the post-Katrina New Orleans system make several claims about impressive growth in student achievement in the Recovery School District from 2005 to 2014. New Orleans is painted as the national model even though the model has not been successfully emulated anywhere else. In fact, as described in the body of this report:

1. Although still limited, high-quality research tells the real story about school reform efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans, and the results are not nearly as impressive as advocates claim. Louisiana has tried to restrict researcher access to data, and researchers are fighting the issue in the courts.
2. The so-called positive impact of the reforms is based on misleading and manipulated accountability metrics.
3. The New Orleans reforms continue to generate a host of formal civil rights complaints and legal action regarding excessive suspensions and expulsions, racial bias in school closing policy, and special education. The RSD and OPSB are now under the supervision of a court-appointed independent monitor and are required to implement federal laws, review discipline policies, exclusionary practices, and flag charter schools deviating from strict statistical targets for special education.
4. Even though proximity to school is second only to academic quality when parents choose schools, transportation distance and costs are now higher as many children are bused past nearby schools to distant neighborhoods.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kristen Buras. “Charter Schools Flood New Orleans,” *Progressive*, Dec. 26, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Five schools were already under state control prior to Hurricane Katrina.

<sup>3</sup> The portfolio district concept merges decentralization, charter school expansion, test-driven accountability and the closing of “failing” schools. Low-scoring schools are either shut down, converted to charters, or for some charter schools, their charters given to another charter school operator promising better results.