Creating and sustaining a new kind of education system after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans

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Overview

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath disrupted every element of life in the city of New Orleans, but no sector was affected as much as education. Almost all New Orleans public schools were taken over by the state and eventually turned into autonomous charter schools. By the end of the state takeover 13 years later, all of the city's publicly funded schools were converted to charter schools. Now, New Orleans schools are reunified into one district governed by the local school board. While this is consistent with school reform approaches in other cities, no city has gone as far as New Orleans.

Part of that work was necessary, as 110 school buildings (87 percent of those in operation)[1] were damaged by the storm, and students, teachers, and staff were evacuated without a clear path to return home. Education leaders did not know when or where families would return, but they did know that they had to get schools opened quickly to ensure residents could return. Other aspects of the New Orleans school reforms focused on pursuing radical changes to the education system.

Photo source: Shutterstock

The state leveraged existing takeover and charter school policies already in place to build a new kind of school system in New Orleans.

Instead of having a few charter schools in a sea of traditional public schools, roles have

reversed so that only one school today is not a charter school. Instead of mainly being controlled by the superintendent and local school board, New Orleans schools are run by about 30 nonprofit organizations. There are no schools receiving an "F" letter grade, 79 percent of students graduate on time, and 65 percent of graduates continue to college.[2] Students can attend schools across the city, as there are no more zoned public schools, but almost a quarter of students choose to attend private schools. The number of K-12 schools and students has dropped by almost half, largely due to population decline[3].

In this report, we describe how these reform efforts affected student learning and outcomes, the teaching workforce, and school and district operations by comparing the students of New Orleans to similar ones in other districts that did not experience the school reforms. Education systems are a critical component of building the capacity for resilience in communities, as they train productive citizens who contribute to the workforce and community problem solving.[4] In New Orleans, over the first decade after Hurricane Katrina, we find that these reforms led to large gains in a wide range of student outcomes. These improvements were due to the reforms themselves, especially the ongoing process of taking over and replacing low-performing schools, and not due to outside factors such as the changing population.

Over the second decade after Hurricane Katrina, those gains have mainly been sustained. There has been some improvement in equity and no negative effects on crime or student mobility. However, there are fewer experienced, certified, and Black teachers and less of a focus on the arts than before the 2005 storm. We supplement these analyses with a description of the private school sector, which has enrolled a large and growing share of students over time. We end with insights into how the New Orleans model helps and hinders ongoing improvements, and what other parts of the country can learn from the city's unprecedented school reforms.

Education reforms in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

The Louisiana state legislature took swift action after Hurricane Katrina to enable the quick reopening of schools, while also implementing changes long pursued by many members of the local, state, and national education community. Two education reform strategies already in state law—state takeovers and charter schools—were adjusted to accommodate what leaders felt was needed to create a new kind of education system in New Orleans.

The state Recovery School District—a special district established in 2003 that operates statewide—had already taken over five schools in the city that were deemed failing. After Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana state legislature gave it the authority over any school performing below the state average—81 percent of the 126 schools in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina.[5] The remaining 13 schools were managed by the Orleans Parish School Board.

State management of the Recovery School District schools in the city was brief, while the state selected local and national nonprofit organizations to take over the each of the schools and convert them to charter schools. By 2015, all of the Recovery School District schools had transitioned to charter schools, and all but six of the schools under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board became charter schools as well.

Other decisions made at the start of the education reforms after Hurricane Katrina also had lasting impact on the New Orleans community. To ensure families returning to any part of the city could access schools as they reopened, attendance boundaries were removed and families would have to apply to schools for a seat, as there were no longer zoned schools that guaranteed access for students in the neighborhood.

Similarly, all teachers were fired and had to reapply for their jobs, and the union contract was not renewed. Young, inexperienced teachers from alternative certification programs, such as Teach for America,

took over a large portion of teaching jobs (more than 20 percent of all teachers employed between 2009 and 2019).[6]

Ten years after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees, the state began the process of ending the state takeover and moving all schools to the governance of the Orleans Parish School Board. In 2016, the state legislature passed Act 91, which gave the Recovery School District two years to transition all schools to the local school district, a process called "reunification." At the end of that process, in 2018, New Orleans became the first 100 percent charter school district in the country, with all schools under the governance of the local school board.

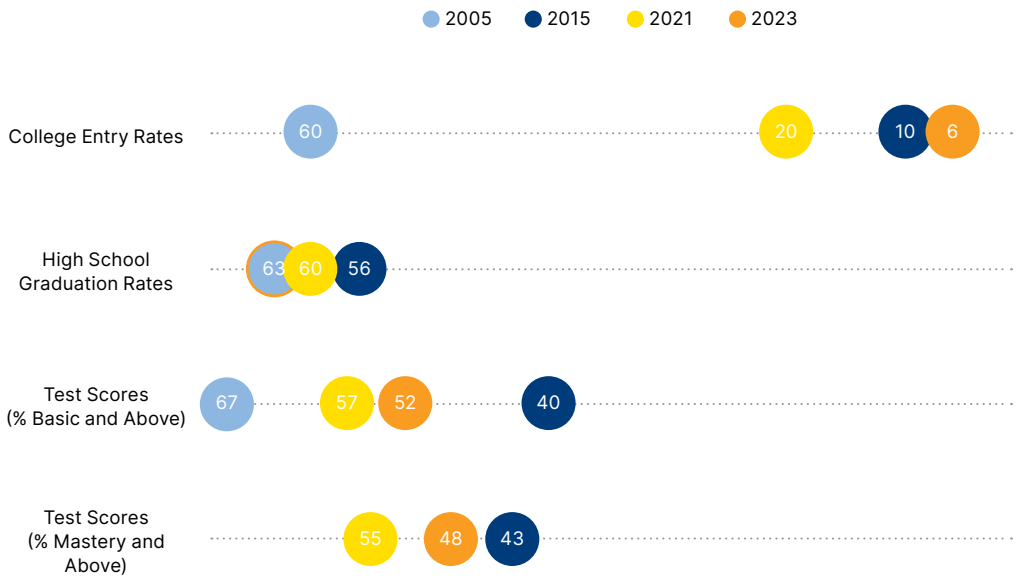
But this did not mean a return to traditional local control. Critically, curriculum, instruction, and school staffing remain in the control of charter schools and their Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) did regain control over enrollment, charter authorization, facilities, and some elements of funding, but with limitations to their power codified in state law. Table 1 outlines the main areas of school management and what entity had control over them before Hurricane Katrina, during the state takeover, and after reunification.

The effects of the sweeping education reforms implemented after Hurricane Katrina on student outcomes have been largely positive. New Orleans schools went from being ranked near the bottom of the state in every outcome to being ranked in the middle in 2015, except for college entry, which moved to the top 10 districts in the state. These data align with analyses that showed the large effects of these reforms on student outcomes when using difference-in-differences strategies that compare student outcomes pre- and post-reform in New Orleans with students in similar schools and districts across the state.[7] (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1

Sweeping education reforms after Hurricane Katrina delivered significant improvements in student achievement in New Orleans

State rankings of New Orleans student outcomes, 2005–2023



Source: Data come from publicly available data from the Louisiana Department of Education.

Note: Rankings are calculated by comparing New Orleans schools to schools in the 68 districts across the state. Test scores include an average of the percent of students reaching mastery or above in grades three through eight. We do not have data on the percent of students reaching mastery in 2005, given the state standard changed during the 2015–2016 school year.

TABLE 1

How New Orleans schools were run over the past two decades

Changes in roles and responsibilities of state and district leaders before the state takeover (before 2005), during the state takeover (2005–2018), and after reunification (after 2018)

	Before Hurricane Katrina	During the state takeover	After school district reunification
Enrollment	The Orleans Parish School Board assigned students to schools based on their geographic location, except for charter schools that accepted students across the city.	The state legislature eliminated geographic enrollment zones. The Recovery School District operated a centralized enrollment system for all schools under their governance.	NOLA Public Schools operates a centralized enrollment system that all schools are required to participate in.
Governance	*Local district*	*State*	*Local district*
Curriculum and instruction	The Orleans Parish School Board provided guidance on curriculum and instruction to their direct-run schools. Charter schools had autonomy in instructional materials.	CMOs and charter schools had autonomy in determining the materials they used in instruction and how they assessed students.	CMOs and charter schools have autonomy in determining the materials they use in instruction and how they assess students.
Governance	*Mostly local district*	*Mostly individual schools or CMOs*	*Mostly individual schools or CMOs*
School staffing	Educators and staff were employees of the Orleans Parish School Board, which handled all personnel decisions (direct-run schools only). The district had a collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union.	Educators and staff were employees of private charter schooling organizations and CMO that handled all personnel decisions. The local district handled all human resources and staffing decisions for their direct-run schools. There was no collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union.	Charter schools and CMOs make their own staffing decisions. Individual CMOs and charter schools can sign on to agreements with the teachers' union.
Governance	*Local District*	*Individual schools or CMOs*	*Individual schools or CMOs*
Charter school authorization	The state school board made charter contract decisions for the five Recovery School District charter schools. The OPSB approved their one charter school.	The state school board made charter contract decisions for the Recovery School District's charter schools (now the vast majority of schools). The OPSB made charter contract decisions for their charter schools.	Charter contracts are made with NOLA Public Schools. The superintendent makes charter decisions, which can only be overturned by two-thirds vote by the OPSB.
Governance	*State/local district*	*Mostly state*	*Local district*
Facilities	OPSB owned and managed all of their facilities for schools across the city.	Recovery School District owned and managed the facilities for schools under their control. The local district managed the facilities for schools under their control.	NOLA Public Schools gains ownership and management of all facilities, except for those still being renovated with FEMA funds.
Governance	*Local district*	*State*	*Local district*
Funding disbursements to schools	OPSB distributed funds to its direct-run schools based as it preferred.	Recovery School District distributed funds using weighted per-pupil funding (more funding to those serving more disadvantaged students). OPSB distributed funds to their schools based on student enrollment without weighting initially.	NOLA Public Schools adopts the weighted funding formula started by the Recovery School District. NOLA Public Schools also has authority to raise local funds for centralized services, such as the Systemwide Needs Program.
Governance	*Local district*	*State/local district*	*Local district*

Source: Table 1 adapted from Carroll, J, et al. 2024. "A New First: What happened when New Orleans' unprecedented all-charter system was returned to a locally elected school board?" Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.

Importantly, these analyses include multiple tests showing that the results are not driven by changes in the student population and demographics. In fact, New Orleans was one of the highest achievement growth districts in the country.[8] While these improvements are some of the largest seen within any urban school district in the country, they must be taken within the larger context, in that Louisiana was, at the time, ranked at the bottom of states in terms of performance.

Outcomes remained around the state average until a dip in 2021 related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, New Orleans schools mostly recuperated from all losses related to the pandemic, with outcomes that are similar to those in districts across the state.

Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, suggest some improvement in Louisiana's overall education performance, moving from being ranked 49th in the United States in 2019 to 32nd in 2024.[9] The fact that New Orleans has increased and then maintained its statewide standing is all the more impressive given how much the state itself has been improving.

In the next section of this report, we outline the policy decisions that support the positive student outcomes described above, and some of the negative effects of these reforms on the community.

Reform policies that contributed to improved student access and student achievement

The main mechanism that led to improvements in outcomes for students in New Orleans was the replacement of low-performing schools with higher-performing ones.[10] With charter contracts tied closely to student results on standardized tests, the Recovery School District was able to take over ineffective schools more quickly than would usually occur in traditional school districts. And in the early years of the reforms, there were many high-quality school operators applying to take over low-performing schools.

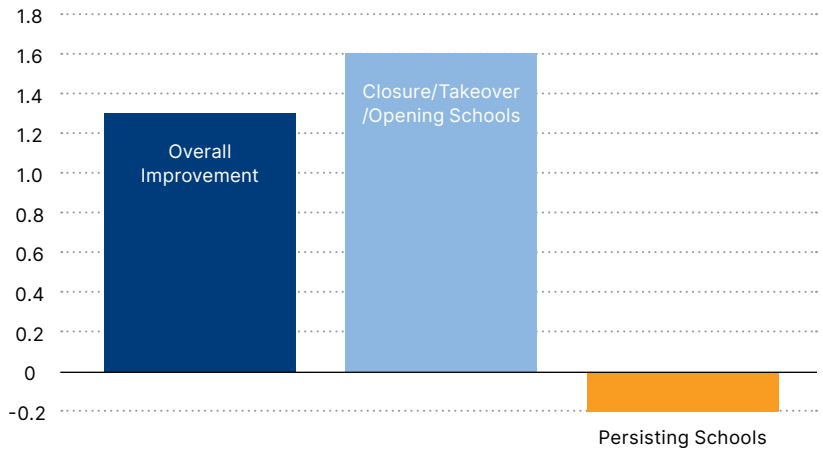
From 2007 to 2016, New Orleans schools improved their value-added, or the amount their students improved on test scores, by 1.3 standard deviations. This increase was driven by the closures, takeovers, and openings of 57 different schools during this period, and not by improvements in the 24 schools without a change in operations (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

School Value-Added (School-Level Standard Deviation Units)

Improvement in school quality in New Orleans from 2007–2016 was due to closing or taking over low-performing schools and opening higher-performing ones

Source: Figure reprinted from Harris et al. 2019. "How is New Orleans school performance evolving, and why?" Education Research Alliance for New Orleans



School closures or takeovers can be challenging experiences for students and families, as they have to find new schools that put students in new communities. While this process can be disruptive for students and set them back, our research suggests that students in closed schools on average performed better in the immediate years following the transition to a new school, especially elementary school students. We did not find the same impact for high school students; these students may not have had enough time to get back on track for on-time graduation.[11]

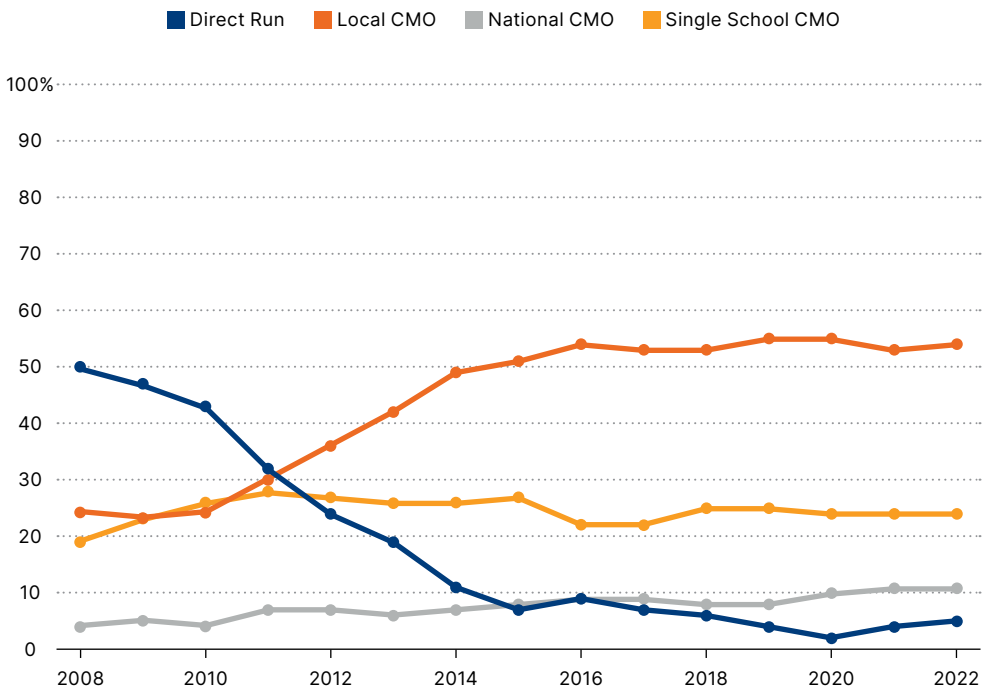
School closures and takeovers tied to explicit policies for improving students' educational environments can help reduce the potential negative impact on students and families. In New Orleans, two policies helped drive this process. First, applications for new charter schools included information about having a proven track record for improving student outcomes in the community. From 2010 through 2020, as schools were closed, they were increasingly taken over by local CMOs, whereas the percent of schools under their own management or management by national CMOs remained consistent over time. (See Figure 3.)

Another policy change gave students in closing schools priority in the centralized enrollment system, meaning they would receive a seat in oversubscribed schools before students applying to transfer from schools that remained open. This policy started during the 2017–2018 application cycle and coincided with a partnership with EdNavigator (a nonprofit organization that supports families' access to education), which provided information to families in closed schools about the high-quality options available to them. This support increased the percent of families in closed schools that applied early and listed schools with higher ratings in the application system.

FIGURE 3

The changing management of New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina

Percent of New Orleans schools under different kinds of management, 2008–2022



Source: Data come from publicly available data from the Louisiana Department of Education and Cowen Institute.

Note: A Single School CMO is a school that is its own local education agency but only includes one school. A direct-run school is one that is still managed by the Orleans Parish Local Education Agency. A Local CMO is one that has multiple schools under its management, but only those operating within the state of Louisiana. A National CMO has multiple schools under its management, including those outside of Louisiana.

This priority in the centralized enrollment system increased the percent of students who ended up in higher-ranked schools, resulting in these students performing better on standardized tests the following year. Yet many students still ended up in lower-ranked schools, and the average test scores remained below students in D/F-rated schools that did not close (see Figure 4).

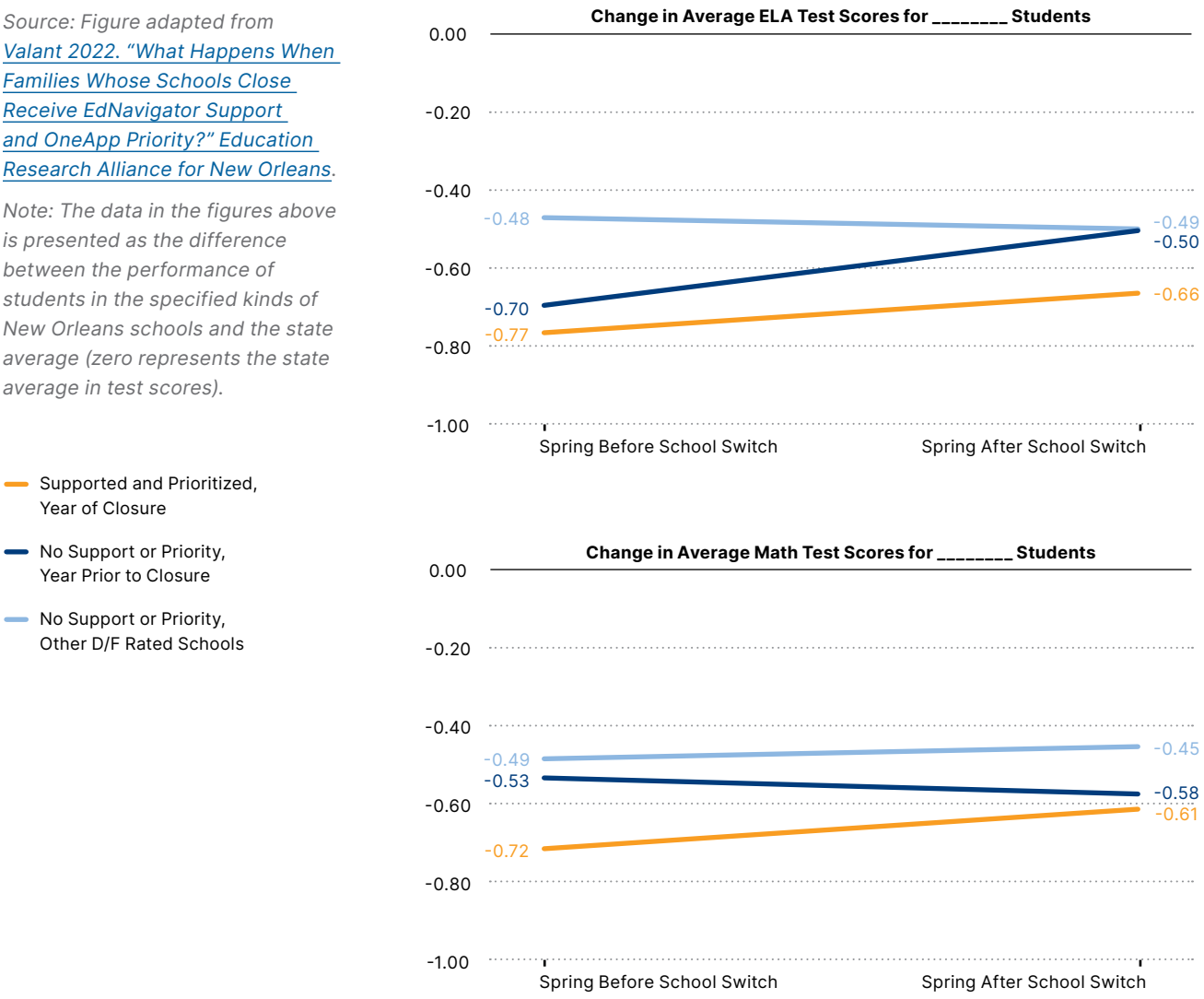
These results suggest that the process of replacing low-performing schools with potentially higher-performing ones can improve students' test scores and outcomes if these students' families have the information necessary to select a higher-performing school and they receive priority in the enrollment system to secure a seat.[12] Yet, these policies cannot completely erase the disruptions that come with changing schools.

FIGURE 4

Test scores for students in New Orleans from supported and prioritized families increased slightly after exiting their closed schools

Source: Figure adapted from Valant 2022. "What Happens When Families Whose Schools Close Receive EdNavigator Support and OneApp Priority?" Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.

Note: The data in the figures above is presented as the difference between the performance of students in the specified kinds of New Orleans schools and the state average (zero represents the state average in test scores).



To ensure equal access to the top-rated schools, New Orleans schools are now guided by three integral policies. First, all schools are required to provide transportation to students, regardless of where they live in the city. This policy helps to disconnect neighborhood from school economic and racial segregation because all students technically have access to any school in the city.

Research finds, however, that travel time to school does play a role in families' decisionmaking, and the top-rated schools are not equally distributed across the city. Families in high-poverty neighborhoods can only access about half of the A/B-rated schools in the city in 40 minutes or less through school bus or public transportation. Families in areas with less access to cars are less likely to apply to A/B-rated schools. Offering school buses does improve student access to schools, but not without a long travel time.[13]

Another area that contributed to improvements in equity in access to schools was through funding schools based on the needs of their students. Starting in 2016, funding was allocated to schools based on the proportion of students from economically disadvantaged families and students with special needs, granting more money to schools that educated a higher proportion of these students. While state law required differentiated funding based on student characteristics, the local school board now has the authority to determine the exact way the funding gets allocated to schools. This differentiated funding formula was key in getting schools on board to the last policy we focus on: the centralized enrollment system.

One of the largest complaints about charter schools, both in New Orleans and nationally, is that they sometimes choose to educate a select group of students, either by excluding or creating barriers for certain kinds of students. There is evidence that this was happening in the early years of the education reforms put in place after Hurricane Katrina.[14] Students with special needs were much less likely to be enrolled in the charter schools in the city, and the charter schools were criticized for having high expulsion rates.

In response, the Recovery School District created centralized systems to track student enrollment and expulsions across city schools. Starting in 2011, all Recovery School District schools were required to participate in these systems, which contributed to fewer expulsions and more students with disabilities in New Orleans schools (see Figures 5 and 6).

In the years following the start of the centralized enrollment system (then called OneApp and now called the NOLA-PS Common Application Process, or NCAP), schools under the Orleans Parish School Board also entered the system. In the buildup to the reunification of schools in 2014, the two school districts signed an agreement to require all schools to join the centralized enrollment system once their charter contracts were up for renewal.

The last schools to join the centralized enrollment system were the academically selective, higher-achieving schools that historically educated more higher-income and White students than the other schools in the city. Research found that entering the OneApp increased the enrollment of Black and other non-White students in these schools without decreasing enrollment of White students or affecting students' experience in these schools (i.e., test scores, discipline rates, and teacher mobility).[15]

In sum, the education reforms instituted in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina have contributed over the past 20 years to improvements in student outcomes through school accountability that closed low-performing schools and replaced them with schools managed by higher-performing operators. Centralized transportation and enrollment policies prioritized equity in student access to schools. Next, we discuss other aspects of the education reforms enacted after Hurricane Katrina that led to less positive experiences.

FIGURE 5

After the start of the centralized system, expulsions fell in New Orleans

Number of expulsions by school governance, 2008–2020

Source: Data come from Louisiana Department of Education and NOLA-PS.

Note: NOLA signifies any expulsions that ocurred in New Orleans schools. RSD signifies expulsions that occurred in schools governed by the Recovery School District. OPSB signifies expulsions in schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board. The Transition Period signifies the two-year period during which all RSD schools were transitioned to governance under OPSB.

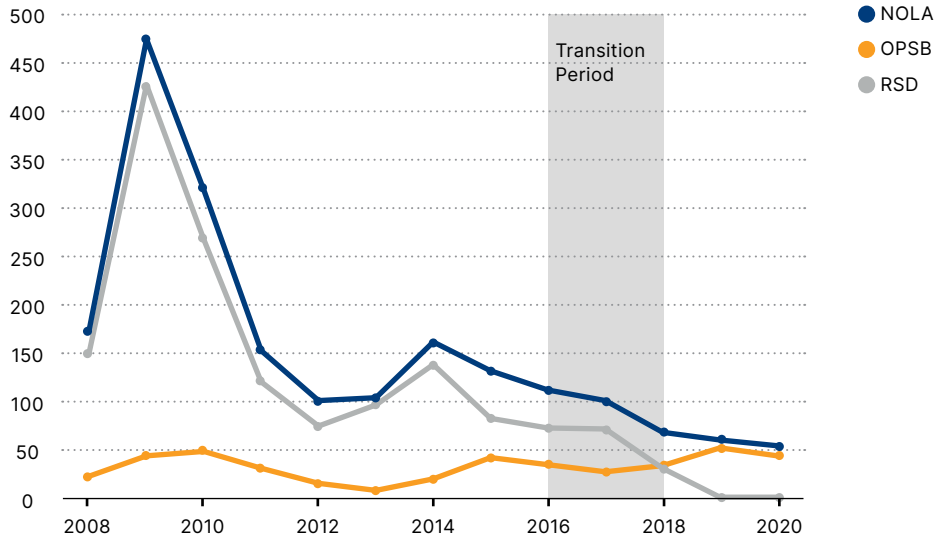


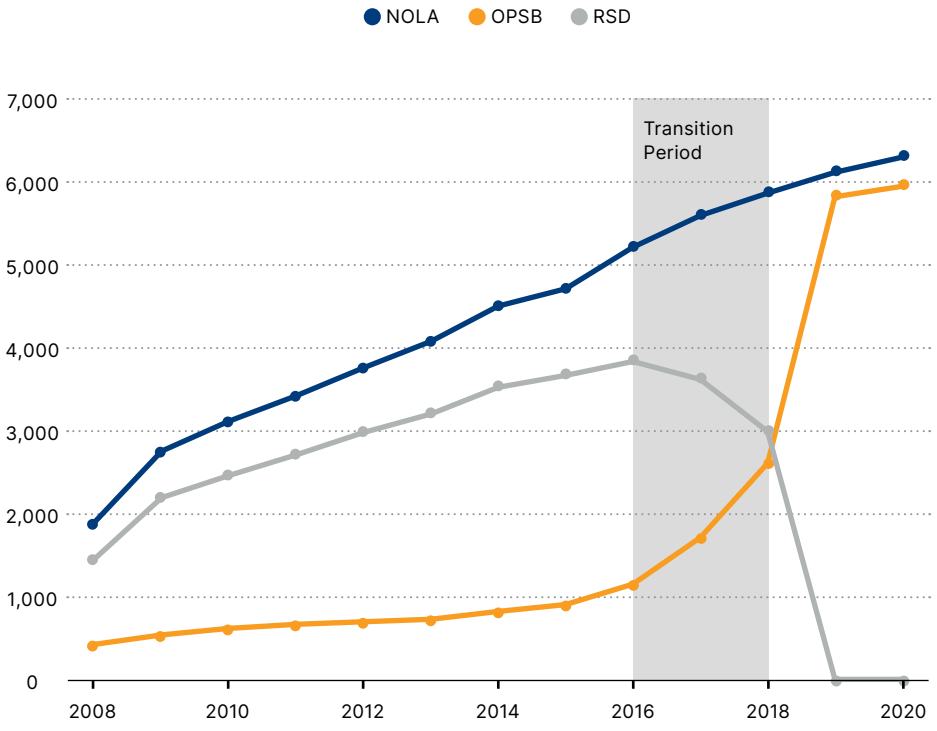
FIGURE 6

As equity in educational access in New Orleans improved, enrollment of students with disabilities increased

Number of students with disabilities enrolled in New Orleans schools by school governance 2008–2020

Source: Data come from Louisiana Department of Education and NOLA-PS.

Note: We define students with disabilities as those with Individualized Education Plans, exlcuding students labeled as Gifted and Talented. NOLA signifies the number of students with disabilities enrolled in New Orleans schools. RSD signifies students with disabilities enrolled in schools governed by the Recovery School District OPSB signifies students with disabilities enrolled in schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board. The Transition Period signifies the two-year period during which all RSD schools were transitioned to governance under OPSB.



Lingering negative effects of the reforms

Some of the education policy decisions made after Hurricane Katrina have left lasting impacts on the New Orleans education system that have been challenging to remedy. One of the most important areas is the composition of the teaching workforce. Before Hurricane Katrina, almost 70 percent of teachers in New Orleans schools had high-level certification, and 71 percent were Black.[16] As of 2022, only 60 percent of teachers are Black and around half are not certified at all. In 2005, 67 percent of New Orleans teachers had more than five years of experience, but in 2022, only 51 percent of teachers did.[17]

The union environment has also changed considerably. Before Hurricane Katrina, the district had a contract with the United Teachers of New Orleans, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. Now, union organization is done with each individual school or CMO, and few have received enough votes from teachers to join.

The changes in the teacher workforce, among other factors, might also have negatively affected students' experiences in the classroom. First, New Orleans students rated their teachers below teachers nationally on many aspects of teaching in our 2018–2019 New Orleans Citywide Youth Survey. While New Orleans students perceived that their teachers challenged them and helped them integrate information at similar rates as students nationally, they reported worse classroom management, that their teachers were not caring, and that teachers could not hold their interest in the material.[18] There were improvements in many aspects of teaching in the 2021–2022 survey, but not in critical areas, such as caring.[19]

Results from the Citywide Youth Survey also found that Black students report worse school environments than White students in New Orleans schools. Black students report more bullying, less school safety, less emotional safety, and more inequitable treatment compared to White students. In addition, Black students are less likely than White students to agree that they have an adult in school they feel they can speak to and that teachers and other school employees understand their mental health needs (see Figures 7 and 8).

FIGURE 7

Black and Hispanic students in New Orleans reported less supportive schools than White students

Instances of positive school climates as reported by Black, Hispanic, and White students, 2021–2022

Source: Figure adapted from Carroll et al. 2023. "Voices of New Orleans Youth 2022 How are our city's children doing after three unusual years?" Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.

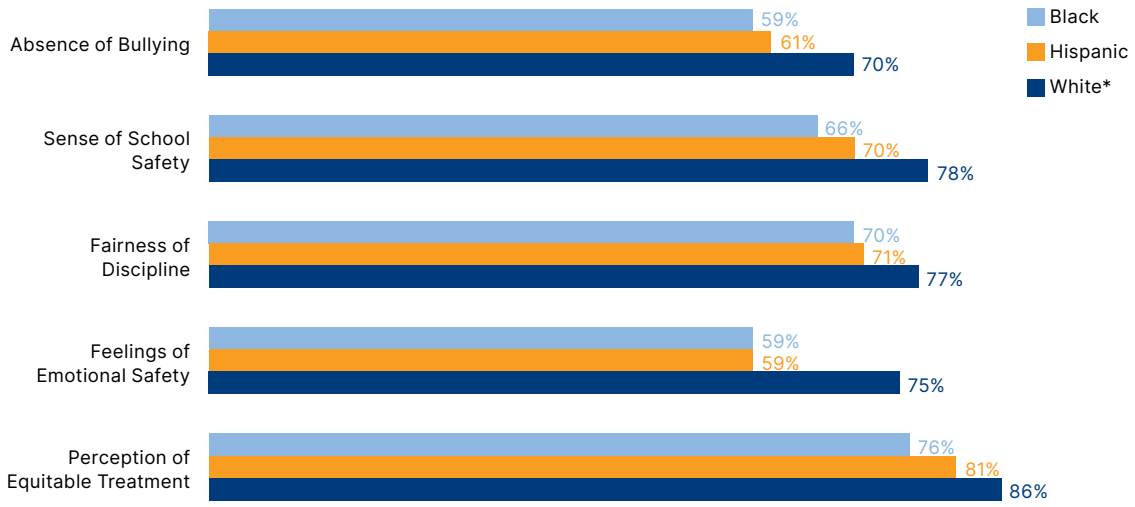


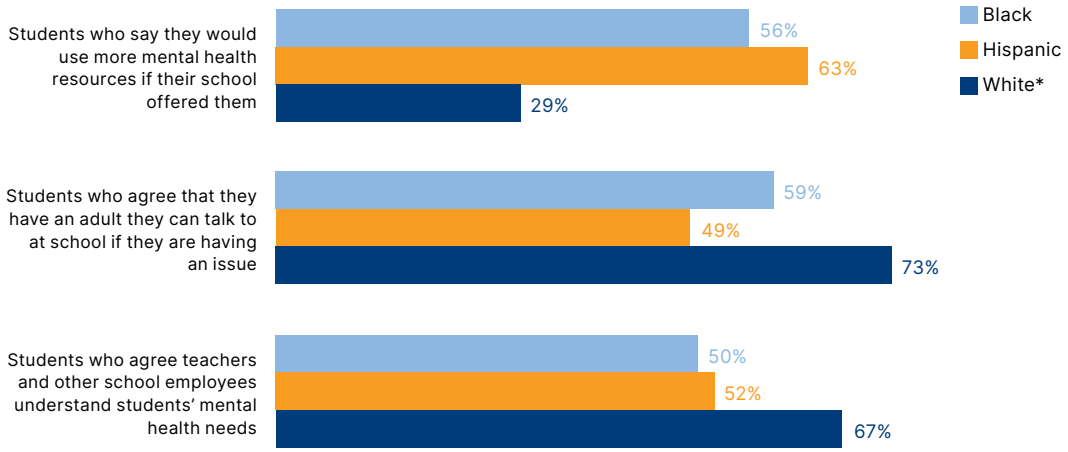
FIGURE 8

Black and Hispanic students in New Orleans reported less mental health support in schools than White students

Instances of positive mental health support in school as reported by Black, Hispanic, and White students, 2021–2022

Source: Data come from publicly available data from the Louisiana Department of Education.

**Note: Indicates responses are significantly different from Black students' responses (p<.05).*



These results suggest that Black students in New Orleans schools, who comprise about 70 percent of the student population, do not feel as supported in schools as their White counterparts.[20] Importantly, though, we do not have student perception data from before Hurricane Katrina, so it is unclear how much of this disparity is due to the education reforms.

One concern about the post-2005 education reforms was that they would increase school segregation, which research suggests is only partially true. New Orleans schools were highly segregated before the storm, with White students and those from higher-income families only attending the higher-performing schools in the city or opting to attend private schools. An analysis of racial-ethnic and income school segregation before and after Hurricane Katrina revealed no change for elementary schools, but there was evidence of increased segregation in high schools for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.[21]

The centralized enrollment system did improve access to the schools that historically educated a higher proportion of White and higher-income students, but some aspects of the enrollment system still perpetuate racial/ethnic and economic segregation in schools.

An examination of placements in the centralized enrollment system for the 2018–2019 school year found that Black students and low-income students were less likely to get a seat in their first-choice school than White and higher-income students because they were less likely to have a sibling enrolled in the school or live within a short distance from the school.[22]

These are two of the "priorities" that schools can elect to use in determining which students get selected when there are not enough seats for all students who listed the school on their applications.[23] Because higher-rated schools are located in neighborhoods with more high-income and White students, these students receive a geographic priority for oversubscribed seats.

Equity in student outcomes by race and ethnicity and family incomes remains an issue in NOLA Public Schools. While some of our research shows that education reforms instituted over the past 20 years improved equity in outcomes in the first decade of the reforms, Black and economically disadvantaged students still on average have worse test scores than their White and higher-income peers (see Figures 9 and 10).

FIGURE 9

White students in New Orleans continue to benefit from access to better schools

Percent of students reaching mastery or above on 3rd and 8th grade Louisiana Educational Assessment Program tests by race and ethnicity in New Orleans and schools across Louisiana, 2017–2023.

Source: Data come from publicly available data from the Louisiana Department of Education

Note: The Louisiana lines indicate the average across all schools in Louisiana. The New Orleans lines indicate the average among schools within Orleans Parish.

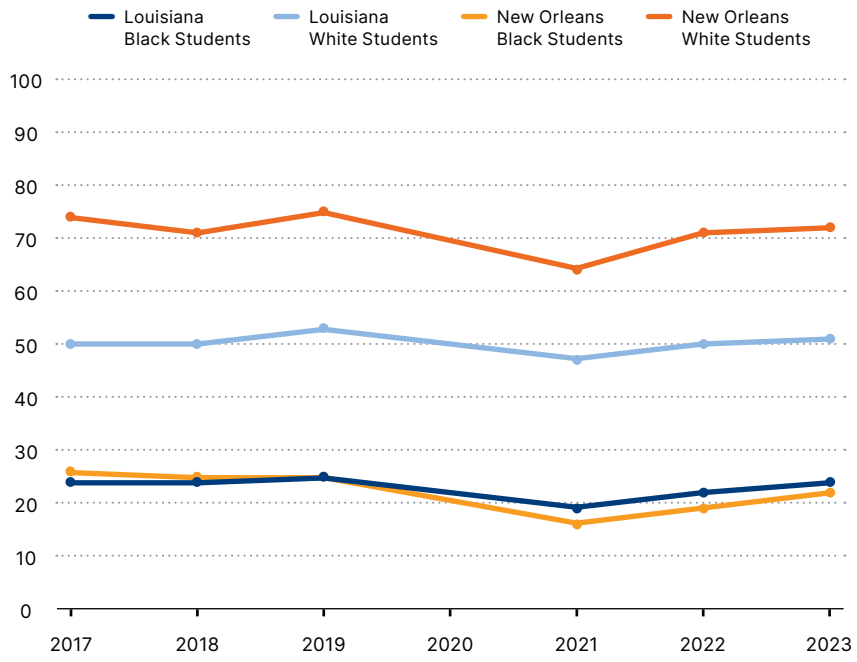


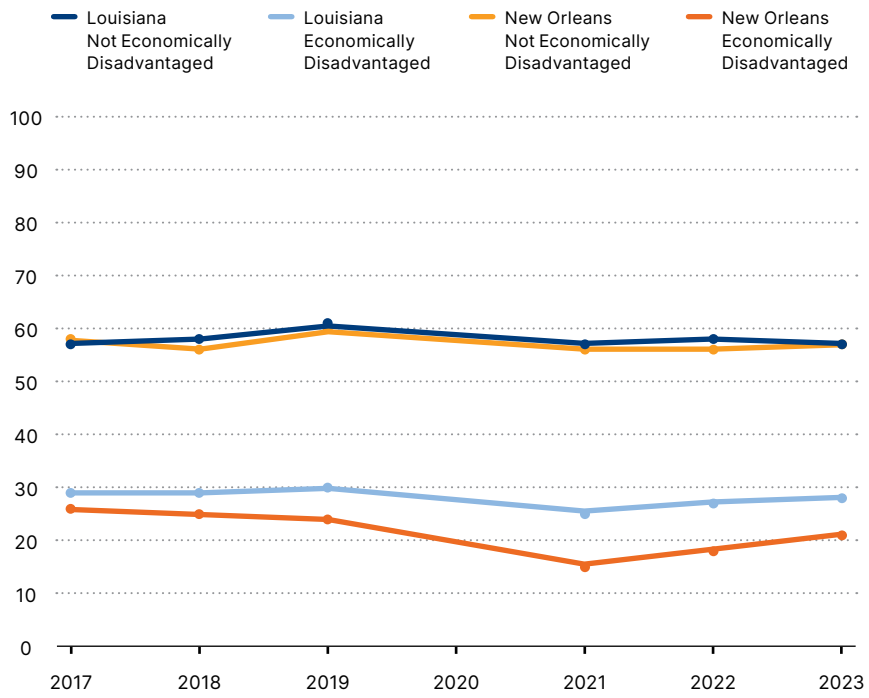
FIGURE 10

Economically disadvantaged students in New Orleans are performing less well

Percent of students reaching mastery or above on 3rd and 8th grade Louisiana Educational Assessment Program tests by economic disadvantaged status in New Orleans and schools across Louisiana

Source: Author's calculations from U.S. Census data for 2000 and American Community Survey 5-year estimates from the remaining years.

Note: The Louisiana lines indicate the average across all schools in Louisiana. The New Orleans lines indicate the average among schools within Orleans Parish.



Black students in New Orleans schools perform at similar rates as Black students across the state, whereas White students in New Orleans schools outperform White students in schools across the state, potentially because the White students in New Orleans are disproportionately enrolled in academically selective schools. Economically disadvantaged students in New Orleans schools on average have lower test scores than those in schools across the state. These are, unfortunately, persistent patterns across almost all U.S. districts. While the education reforms in New Orleans after 2005 generated many improvements, these trends have not been addressed.

Much of the focus of the effectiveness of the reforms, and of the New Orleans schools in general, centered on student outcomes, but schools do more than educate students, especially schools in New Orleans. Music and art are critical aspects of education that often get overlooked in policy and practice, especially as schools put their time and energy into improving student test scores. Between 2010 and 2016, New Orleans elementary schools had fewer students enrolled in arts courses than in similar districts across the state.[24]

Interviews with teachers and school leaders revealed that some administrators emphasized the arts as important marketing tools, especially with marching bands in Mardi Gras parades, but arts instructors perceived that they received less support from their leaders than teachers of tested subjects.[25] Many schools that initially cut arts programs and bands in the early years of the reforms eventually realized their importance and rebuilt them, but not without consequence.

The loss of historic schools as anchors of communities was another negative effect of the reforms after Hurricane Katrina. In the early years of the reforms, traditional public schools taken over by charter networks had their names changed to remove the negative connotation of a "failing school." But this led to the erasure of the legacy of the schools and their bands, alumni, and place within the community.

In the past few years, CMOs have reverted to many of the historical names to maintain schools' historic roots, even while changing management and location. KIPP Public Charter Schools, for example, took over Douglas High School, which was the lowest-ranked school in the state in 2008, and renamed it KIPP Renaissance, even though it remained in the Douglas Building. For the 2019–2020 school year, the name was changed back to Douglas.[26] Other historical schools and their buildings, however, remain closed to this day, such as Joseph S. Clark and Raboiun (the latter's building is up for auction),[27] partially due to the decline in enrollment after the storm.

In rebuilding the New Orleans school system after Hurricane Katrina, a legacy was erased. Some saw the school system's legacy as one of corruption, poor student achievement, and dilapidated buildings.[28] This perception informed most of the policies during the rebuilding process. But many in the New Orleans community also remember the legacy of empowering Black communities, powerhouse bands, instilling Black excellence in students, and supporting Black leadership in schools.[29] The past decade of the reforms has attempted to bring back this positive legacy, while upholding the improvements in student achievement that characterized the first decade. But much work is left to be done.

Role of private schools

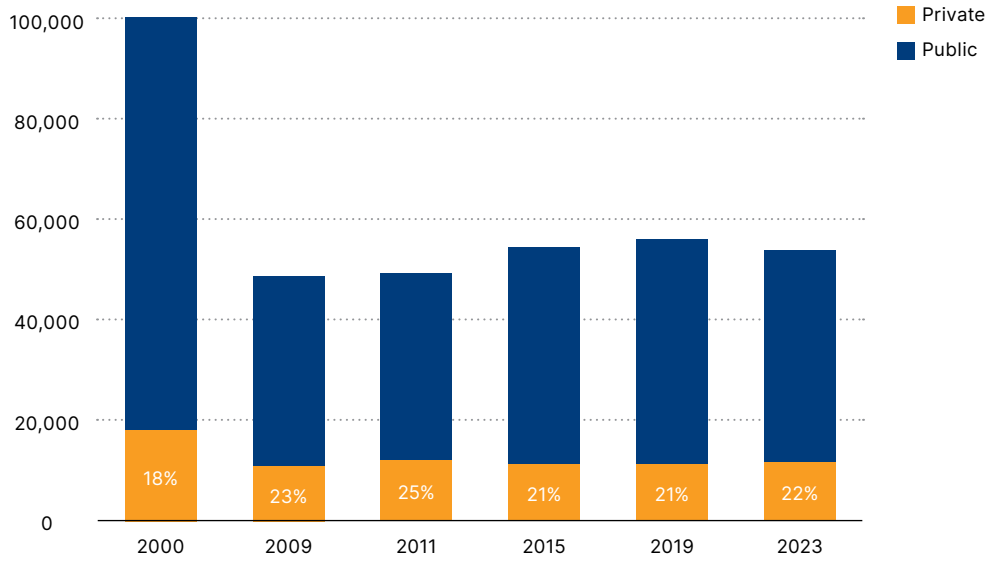
The reform efforts after Hurricane Katrina focused on rebuilding the public education system, but private schools in New Orleans played an important role in this effort. New Orleans has consistently had one of the highest rates of students attending private schools in the country. According to data from the 2000 Census, about 12 percent of students nationally attended private K-12 schools, whereas 18 percent of students in New Orleans did.[30] In the years after Hurricane Katrina, this percentage increased to about 25 percent and has remained at about that rate, according to American Community Survey data from 2023 (see Figure 11).[31]

FIGURE 11

Private school attendance rates in New Orleans rose after Hurricane Katrina

Number of students in public and private K-12 schools in New Orleans, 2000–2023

Source: Author's calculations from U.S. census data for 2000 and American Community Survey 5-year estimates from the remaining years.



A thriving private school sector that provided an alternative to parents who could afford to exit the public school system may have been a critical element that allowed for the post-2005 education reforms to be put in place and sustained, as many of the individuals that supported the reforms did not have children in the public school system.

As in the vast majority of urban school districts across the United States, higher-income New Orleans families choose between private schools and selective-admission public schools. Many students who apply to selective charter schools through the NCAP system do not get in, and they end up attending New Orleans private schools. It is challenging to fully quantify this phenomenon because data are not available on which students attend private schools.

One way, however, that researchers have investigated the choice between public and private schools is through the voucher program in Louisiana.[32] The Louisiana Scholarship Program allowed low-income students attending C-, D-, and F-graded schools to use public funds to attend private schools. Selection for this program was done through the centralized enrollment system in New Orleans. This meant that parents could rank both voucher-receiving private schools and public schools in their application.

An analysis of these applicants in the 2013–2014 school year found that of the 8,500 students applying for a new school, about 950 (11 percent) selected only private schools and another 950 (11 percent) selected both public school and private schools. The public schools most likely to be selected by these parents were those with higher student test scores, yet parents on average picked the voucher-receiving private schools over these public schools.

The Louisiana Scholarship Program also was unique in that it still required students to complete the same standardized tests as students in public schools. Analyses of the effect of transferring to a voucher-receiving private school found a decrease in test scores and no effect on college entry.[33] The state has since ended this program and replaced it with one that allows any student statewide to apply for funds to attend any private school.[34] This program will begin in the 2025–2026 school year, and it is difficult to tell what the impact will be.

In other states with similar programs, most of the initial applicants were White students from higher-income families who were already enrolled in private schools, but there were increases in students moving from public to private schools as programs expanded.[35] It is possible that more students will leave higher-performing charter schools to attend private schools in New Orleans, which has important implications for equity. With overall declining enrollment in the NOLA Public Schools alongside an increase in the share of New Orleans students attending private schools after COVID-19, this program may have a significant effect on the funding available for New Orleans public schools in the long run.

Lessons for the future and challenges ahead

The education reform movement in New Orleans drew interest from educators and leaders across the country and the globe as a new kind of school system was built. In creating a portfolio school district with essentially all charter schools being governed by the local school district, New Orleans did not have examples to draw on. As described above, there were missteps along the way that required new policies and practices to correct wrongs, such as replacing decentralized enrollment with centralized enrollment.

In 2022, our team interviewed school, state, and city leaders and community members about the transition to local control in New Orleans.[36] Through analysis of these interviews, along with school board meetings, media, and policy documents, we determined a few key elements that will be important to consider as the New Orleans school system continues to develop.

First, district and school leaders are still trying to determine the correct balance between autonomy for schools and centralized services. While the district cannot infringe upon the day-to-day activities in schools, there are certain situations where school leaders may look to the central district for guidance and support. In the case of COVID-19, school leaders deferred to the central office to make decisions about school closures, meals, and technology services, collaborating with them to ensure all of their students' needs were met. Part of that decision was enabled by prior centralized services, such as the centralized enrollment system, which already forced some level of collaboration between school leaders and the district.[37]

In other times of emergency, such as with hurricanes, school leaders recognize that NOLA Public Schools has a direct line to government officials and scientists who can provide guidance on the best decisions—resources not available to individual school leaders.[38] When Hurricane Ida hit just a few months after schools were back in session in 2021, school leaders were poised to follow the guidance of the district, and had virtual learning infrastructure in place to enable learning even while students, teachers, and staff were evacuated for the storm. As one leader noted:

> *Just from like a community level on how there's a sense of responsibility to one another. That, to be honest, I don't know is occurring in other cities, even in neighboring parishes, just given like the spirit of New Orleans, which I think is maybe a little corny, but I think it has at least helped us get through some of the darker moments, for sure.*[39]

While centralized services can build community among district and school leaders, it can also cause distrust in a system built around school autonomy if there is not effective communication and collaboration in building these services. In our 2023 report on the return to local control,[40] many school leaders did not feel that the district included them in decisionmaking and felt that certain schools or CMOs received preferential treatment. One example where this came out was in school-siting decisions, which are largely determined by NOLA Public Schools, which owns most of the buildings in the city. School leaders did not feel the district consulted with them before deciding to open new schools in areas with other school options nearby, potentially draining students from schools already in operation.

In addition, the role of the district as both an accountability officer and support-provider creates tension and confusion. School leaders reported being wary of coming to the district for help because of fears the district may use that information against them when their charter contracts are up. One school leader even referred to district communication as a "gotcha game," where they feel the district is weaponizing information against them.[41] With an increasingly improving set of schools in the district and declining enrollment overall, decisions about school closures and takeovers have become more challenging than they were in the first decade of the reforms, which may contribute to school leaders' fears.

Distrust of district and school leaders also persists in the community and government. There is still anger in the city over the state's takeover and transition to schools being done to them and not with them, and the return to local control was similarly guided by state legislation.[42] Community members now want to see action from the district in response to complaints, but often the complaints are targeted toward areas where the district has little to no formal control. While charter board meetings may be open to the public, there are fewer regulations guiding the communication of these meetings and agendas to the public.

Community members also may not know which school board—the Orleans Parish School Board or the charter school's own board—to turn to so that their voices are best heard. Misunderstandings of roles within the district appear to be the basis behind much of the distrust and confusion. As one community member highlighted during a school board meeting after reunification:

> *We are becoming more and more disenchanted with our schools returning to [the Orleans Parish School Board] if you are going to do nothing but approve charters. Will you respond to what these children, parents, and community need? What are we voting you into these positions for, if you are not going to represent and run these schools? Why even bring them back under [the board]?* [43]

Conclusion

This 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina comes after a challenging 2024-2025 school year for New Orleans. Federal, state, and local policies have threatened school funding.[44] The district is experiencing declining enrollment[45] and a change in leadership.[46] Missed days due to an unexpected snowstorm and hurricanes (with more expected) mean schools have had to build in extra instructional time.[47]

The community, school and district leaders, government officials, and students are called upon to be resilient time and time again. There is much to be proud of over the course of the past 20 years of school improvements in New Orleans. But still more work remains to ensure New Orleans youth are trained to be productive citizens who can solve new community problems that arise and adjust to the economy of the future.

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