

Eight Cities

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New Orleans, Louisiana

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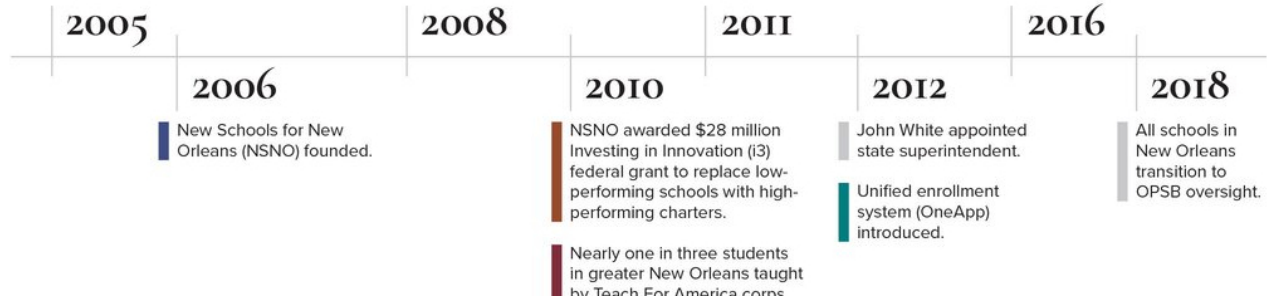
After Hurricane Katrina, the state legislature creates the Recovery School District (RSD), designated to open/close New Orleans schools, oversee the majority of schools in New Orleans, and create a system of autonomous schools under state control.

Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) retains control of 17 schools.

Teach For America and Teach NOLA account for nearly 10% of new teachers hired.

State Department of Education updates school performance scores (A-F grades); these are updated again in 2013 and 2018.

State law initiates return of control of schools to OPSB and codifies autonomous system of schools.



Summary (2005-Present):

- Stable governance model and strong external nonprofit ecosystem enable success
- Innovative state legislation balances centralization and school-level autonomy
- Unified enrollment and discipline policies improve equity
- Fully autonomous system of schools still needs more high-quality options
- Homegrown leaders support talent pipeline and shortages
- [2020 New Orleans Updates](#)

Student Achievement Highlights

- From 2005 to 2016, New Orleans students' state test performance improved substantially compared to the Louisiana state average. The difference between the city and the state in the percentage of students meeting the "approaching basic/basic standard" in grades K-8 shrank from 25 percentage points in 2005 to six percentage points in 2016.
- New Orleans students' test scores improved in reading at a faster rate than the state average in each year from 2014 to 2017, and improved at a faster rate in math in 2015 and 2017.
- From 2009 to 2014, the average New Orleans student achieved 5.7 grade levels of academic growth in just five years of school from third grade to eighth grade, putting it among the top ten districts in the nation for growth.

Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans is a familiar story to education reform observers: In 2005, a once-in-a-lifetime storm and its aftermath devastated a city with one of the lowest-performing school districts in the nation. This sparked a complete rebuilding of their public school system.

Under the auspices of the Recovery School District (RSD), New Orleans schools saw dramatic improvements in student achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment. An influx of innovative, autonomous schools has helped close the achievement gap between the city and the state. In 2005, there was a 25-point gap between city students and the overall state student body on K-8 state assessments. That gap narrowed to 14 points in 2010 and six points in 2016.

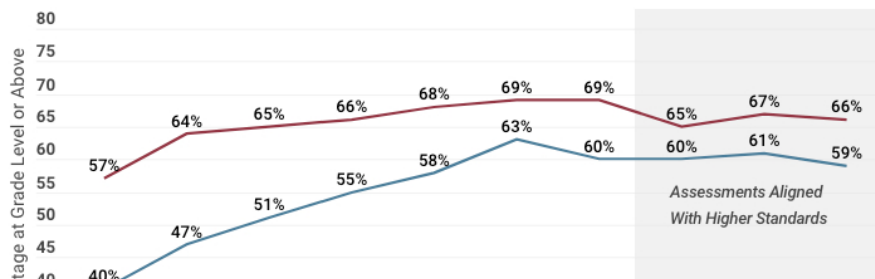
Many leaders see the education improvement strategy that took root in New Orleans as anomalous, something that could only take place in the wake of a terrible natural disaster, with a significant influx of funds in response. While the circumstances that set the strategy in motion were rare, the work that followed holds many lessons for leaders in other cities who want to close achievement gaps and increase high-quality school options. Jamar McKneely, a longtime New Orleans educator and school founder, believes, "People can do this without a hurricane."

"People can do this without a hurricane."

New Orleans has cemented school-level autonomies, implemented an entirely new governance model, and cultivated a strong nonprofit ecosystem to support its schools. It's the only traditional school district that has fully transitioned to a system of autonomous and accountable schools run by a locally elected school board. Doug Harris of Tulane University's Education Research Alliance for New Orleans [calls](#) it a "redefinition of what a school district is. This is what most of the reformers would like to see happen in the cities they're in." Indeed, there's lots to learn from in how New Orleans grappled with complex issues, the decisions the city made, and the results of those decisions.

From 2003 to 2018, the cornerstone of New Orleans' progress was the Recovery School District (RSD), created to transform failing public schools two years before Hurricane Katrina by the Louisiana Legislature. The RSD was initially created to transform schools statewide, but after the storm, the Louisiana legislature empowered its rapid expansion within New Orleans by passing Act 35. This act authorized the RSD to oversee a majority of schools under the jurisdiction of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the city's school district. OPSB retained oversight of 17 schools, of which 12 converted to locally authorized charter schools and five were directly operated by the district.

New Orleans K-8 Students at Basic or Above on Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) 2008-2017





Source: *New Schools for New Orleans*

According to former Louisiana State Superintendent of Education John White, the direct line between the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the city's schools through the RSD was crucial to its success: "The state has to be in the game and in the conversation [about schools]. We had an opportunity where local actors, meaning principals, could be in regular contact with the state chief, which matters a lot ... The more voices that a school is obligated to listen to, the less clear it is where they should spend their time and energies." Without intermediation from districts and their boards, direct contact with schools allowed the state to quickly create the conditions for improvement.

At the heart of many decisions made in the district are two important beliefs: First, schools are the unit of change in advancing opportunity for students, so they need to be able to control the things that allow them to educate as best as they can. Second, in situations where equity is at stake, system-level coordination takes precedence over this autonomy. This philosophy informed — and continues to inform — decisions about how to allocate responsibilities and authority between OPSB, the RSD, and individual schools.

"The state has to be in the game and in the conversation [about schools]."

The presence of two active authorizers (RSD and OPSB) and multiple school operators meant New Orleans needed to address power struggles, centralization, and collaboration while adhering to these core educational philosophies. One example of collaboration is the adoption of a nearly unified enrollment system through an online application called *OneApp*, created in 2014. Jay Altman, co-founder of FirstLine Schools, notes the advantages to schools and students: "[OneApp is] a lot less work for us ... Every family has the same shot of getting into every school except the few with admissions requirements." Henderson Lewis, current OPSB superintendent and a former school principal, remembers the confusion around actual enrollment numbers before schools adopted OneApp. He recognizes the value of unified enrollment for school leaders, families, and the district itself, saying, "[If this system] shows more demand than there are seats, it allows us as a district ... to know the types of schools we should add [and] to see where there is a high demand for a certain operator so that we can have critical conversations about replication."



Henderson Lewis

The design of OneApp also provides an example of how New Orleans has worked to balance competing values and priorities — in this

case, balancing equitable access to quality schools for students in all parts of the city with respect for families' preference to attend schools closer to home. The system is citywide: Regardless of where they reside, students can apply to any open enrollment school in the city. For the many families and school leaders who prefer close proximity, individual elementary and middle schools give priority to half of all open seats to students in the school's geographic zone. (Students in most high schools do not receive this preference by zone.) The result of this is even the very best elementary and middle schools leave half of their seats open for students applying from anywhere in the city, enhancing equity through access. Even so, in the most recent school matching process, an increased number of students using the enrollment system and high demand for the most sought-after schools meant that some students were not admitted to their neighborhood school.

School discipline policies and practices are another area where tensions have emerged between what schools should control and what should be centralized. Like many urban districts, RSD had higher-than-average expulsion rates measured statewide and nationally, and lacked an equitable, consistent expulsion process across the district for students. To respond, in 2012, RSD worked with school leaders to develop a citywide (RSD and OPSB) student discipline system with a common student expulsion policy and a Student Hearing Office. The policy narrowed the list of violations for which a student can be expelled to only the most serious offenses — students can no longer be expelled for “disrespectful or willful disobedience,” uniform violations, or even multiple suspensions. Parents now have access to more frequent disciplinary conferences to avoid tensions and can reference a manual from the office that clearly outlines these disciplinary policies. The system is designed to be flexible and keep discipline issues from becoming expulsions.

While expulsions for severe offenses remain, these unified practices have resulted in a huge decline in expulsions citywide. As Erika McConduit, former Urban League of Louisiana president and CEO, notes, “With something as high stakes as expulsion, parents want due process.”

McKneely believes the conversations determining what should and shouldn't be centralized have resulted in the right mix: one that protects autonomy and ensures fairness for children and families. And through statewide Act 91, the Louisiana Legislature has written that mix into law. Passed in 2016, the groundbreaking law codified the OneApp system, created a central office with a narrower focus and an elected board to authorize new schools, and detailed a citywide differentiated funding system in which most spending decisions are made at the school level.

Act 91 planned the unification of all New Orleans schools again under one superintendent and one board as a system of autonomous schools in July 2018, officially ending the split between RSD and OPSB but preserving the collaborative enrollment and discipline policies. It also codifies school-level autonomies, such as the length of the school day and year, instruction, curriculum, hiring and firing of personnel, salaries and benefits, and procurement of services. Other cities have successfully delineated school autonomies, but the passage of Act 91 placed the strength of legislation behind those powers in New Orleans.

While cooperation did not always come easily, for the moment, at least, New Orleans seems to have a stable governance model that was created collaboratively and suits the city's needs. A more stable system and structure brings a different set of questions and challenges into view. New Orleans leaders are now focusing their attention on how to manage a system of schools: how to get more kids into great schools, how to decrease the number of low-quality schools, and how to make sure there are multiple high-quality options in every neighborhood.

A continued priority is opening more good schools through new operators or expanding existing, quality providers. Despite progress to date in improving school performance, there are still too few high-quality options for children who need them. Families with means have long had choice, as reflected in the nearly 25 percent of families who choose to pay for private or parochial schools. Low-income families without those options are often left with inadequate choices, as evidenced by data on demand from OneApp. According to the 2016-2017 School Performance Scores, 37 percent of the city's students attend schools rated D or F.

So how can the city's leaders increase the number of high-quality seats to meet community demand? One approach is to continue the cycle of opening new schools and closing the lowest performers with rigor and discipline. Former Louisiana Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek believes that the kind of “ruthless accountability” that made the RSD effective is required to keep pushing the system to increase student achievement. He believes “you are always going to go up if you take out the lowest performers,” and that a district “is not going to make progress without closing schools.”



Sarah Usdin

Responsibly closing schools that have failed to meet their performance contracts requires better replacement options, but city leaders are grappling with a paucity of available facilities and high-quality, ready-to-launch new schools. Without an adequate pipeline of new schools, the system of continuous improvement is slowing down, making closures impractical and stranding students in poorly performing schools. Sarah Usdin, current OPSB board member and founder of education advocacy and action organization New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), wrestles with the charter school accountability framework that guides the district's authorizing and oversight activities, and “how to implement it realistically so you don't close schools when there aren't better options.” One challenge is that most high-quality operators prefer to grow grade by grade rather than taking over entire schools or launching new schools with all grades fully enrolled, because research suggests gradual growth is more likely to result in a successful school. But a reliance on grade-by-grade growth makes it difficult to ensure high-quality replacements for children when schools close.

As closing schools becomes more difficult, New Orleans leaders are once again considering strategies to turn around existing low-performing schools. McKneely believes finding earlier interventions to transform schools could save families from experiencing the

frustrating churn of “operator after operator after operator” within a community. He shares, “Sometimes I wonder if the district got involved just a little more ... maybe we could have saved that community, because schools are an important part.”

As OPSB leaders and board members wrestle with these challenges, they have crucial partners in New Orleans' strong nonprofit ecosystem, which collaborates in pursuit of successful schools. This robust mix of “regulators, innovators, and collaborators,” according to current NSNO CEO Patrick Dobard, provides funding, community engagement, advocacy, and support. And, importantly, many of these organizations are led by New Orleans natives or long-time residents who lived through Katrina and are still pursuing education equity in New Orleans today, including Lewis, Usdin, and Dobard. NSNO was a particularly important player in this ecosystem, and Usdin believes the “singular focus of an external organization on creating and expanding high-quality schools” was advantageous to New Orleans' recovery. McConduit's Urban League leveraged its community connections and mission to improve education in New Orleans. Its annual Schools Expo, created to support parents trying to navigate multiple independently operated schools across the city, is the city's largest school choice event for parents to interact with school leaders, and it draws thousands to the Superdome. “The message for other cities is that you can't do this in a silo,” says McConduit of the role of community partners.



Patrick Dobard

Community partners also play a large role in addressing an ongoing talent shortage. Superintendent Lewis readily acknowledges that the “school supply issue is really a talent issue.” Dobard agrees, arguing that the city should “double the amount of individuals [ready] to start new schools ... [and] work with strong existing operators to help them grow and replicate.” Dobard believes that by “build[ing] a bench of principals” and other school leaders, New Orleans can “stabilize the market of existing schools” and ensure new and better schools are still in the system. A mix of local and national organizations, including Teach For America, TeachNOLA, Leading Educators, City Year, Kid Smart, the Silverback Society, and Special Education Leaders Fellowship (SELF), collaborate with schools to provide talent support.

While no longer in crisis mode, New Orleans is experiencing a plateau in student achievement, reflecting a continuing need to cultivate the pipeline of better schools and strong teachers. On several measures, such as graduation, end-of-course proficiency, and mastery of state tests, New Orleans results have *leveled or dropped slightly* since 2014. In addition to concerns about supply gaps for schools, teachers, and school leaders, questions remain about whether returning to an elected school board will slow down what has made New Orleans successful. At the very least, evidence suggests the strength of legislation combined with creative collaboration will continue to shape the city's education landscape for the good of students.

New Orleans has moved from a long process of defining its governance model to managing its dynamic system of schools, and the city is now experiencing new challenges that can inform how other cities approach their reform efforts. While cities can gain momentum from a variety of educational reforms, New Orleans illustrates how challenging it is to sustain momentum in a city still overcoming the aftershocks of a disaster. Yet the commitment, lived experience, and educational expertise of its hometown leaders, and the city's willingness to create dialogue across sectors, provides a model for cities seeking educational improvement, even without a storm.

New Orleans continues to be the only city in the country with a school system composed nearly entirely of charter schools. Relatively stable local and state leadership bolstered New Orleans' reforms, but in 2020, longtime superintendent John White announced he would be stepping down. It remains to be seen how this may affect local and state strategies. Superintendent Henderson Lewis continues to lead the city's schools under the governance of a locally elected school board. In 2019 Orleans Parish School Board and the schools it oversees were re named "NOLA Public Schools."

As the **school quality oversight body** for the city, NOLA Public Schools has continued to close persistently low-performing schools, or allow other charter management organizations with a proven track record to take over based on charter **performance contracts**. The district continues to use the state's School Performance Scores as its **school performance framework**, with an extra emphasis on growth and multiyear trends to differentiate among low-performing schools.

As part of continued refinements to its **unified enrollment system**, EnrollNOLA announced that beginning in 2019-20, students living within a half-mile radius of a school will receive priority consideration in the lottery for 25% of open seats. This change is designed to help students attend schools closer to home while reducing transportation costs, but it also could shift the balance of school enrollment options and bring New Orleans closer to a traditional system where students' neighborhoods dictate school choices and quality.

Nearly half of NOLA Public Schools rated a D or F on the state's A-F rating scale in 2019. Although this shows a long way still to go, this rating is based mostly on test score proficiency, and does not necessarily mean that schools have not improved substantially over time. Between 2018 and 2019, graduation rates in NOLA public schools improved by five percentage points, and average test scores in grades K-8 stayed mostly the same.

The following organizations are or were clients or funders of Bellwether: New Schools for New Orleans, Teach For America, and Leading Educators. Bellwether authors maintained editorial control of these stories.



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