New Orleans is leading the way in education reform

Governor Bobby Jindal

*The Times-Picayune*

September 14, 2013

When Hurricane Katrina struck our shores eight years ago and devastated the city of New Orleans, it was more than just infrastructure and commerce that was left in ruin. A school system that was already on life support from years of neglect and mismanagement was in danger of being washed away entirely.

Louisiana recognized that if we were going to return New Orleans to its position as one of the world’s greatest cities, we were going to have to do more than rebuild roads and buildings and reform our state’s business climate.

A **complete overhaul of the city’s education system was in order** if we were going to set New Orleans on a path to a brighter, more prosperous future. Local and state leaders immediately got to work on rebuilding the city’s schools from the ground up, and for good reason.

On average, workers with a high school diploma earn 50 percent more per year than those who do not graduate from high school. High school dropouts will earn about $500,000 less over the next 50 years of their lives than their peers who earned a high school diploma, and they’re twice as likely to end up living in poverty as people who have completed high school. When compared to the typical high school graduate, a dropout will end up costing taxpayers an average of $292,000 over their lives due to the costs associated with incarceration and other factors.

Moreover, every study about healthcare outcomes, incarceration levels and economic opportunity show that education is the key to improving quality of life. We must provide all children the opportunity to get a great education, so that they can pursue the American Dream and realize their full potential.

Seventy percent of inmates at America’s prisons cannot read above a fourth grade level; 75 percent of food stamp recipients are high school dropouts; 85 percent of students
brought into the juvenile justice system are functionally illiterate; and 90 percent of welfare recipients are high school dropouts.

Finally, and perhaps most important to the future growth and success of New Orleans and our entire state -- 70 percent of employers that are looking to relocate to Louisiana or expand an existing business say one of their top two concerns is finding a skilled workforce.

We didn't start the process of reforming the New Orleans school system, but we are building on and supporting the good work started by our predecessors and countless local teachers, students and parents.

In 2008, we took important steps toward remaking the New Orleans school system by working with the Legislature to approve a landmark scholarship program for low-income students in the city who were trapped in failing schools (a program that we later expanded statewide).

And, in order to give parents and students more access to charter schools, we have implemented a number of reforms since taking office.

We removed the cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in Louisiana. Since 2008, the number of charter schools operating in Louisiana has expanded by more than 80 percent, from approximately 66 to 121 -- and 90 percent of public school students in New Orleans attend charters.

We put teeth in the charter school law by allowing charter schools to apply directly to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in D- and F-rated districts and in districts that have failed to implement and/or routinely break current charter school law.

We created a common application process for all charter schools, whether applying to local school boards or BESE, that prioritizes quality instead of paperwork. It includes a fast track process for charter operators that have demonstrated track records in Louisiana or elsewhere and allowing a charter operator to apply for more than one school in the same application cycle.
We also gave charter leaders more flexibility over staffing, allowing them, for example, to hire nontraditional candidates like mid-career switchers.

Louisiana is now ranked sixth in the country for the quality of its charter school laws, according to the National Association of Public Charter Schools.

The results of our Scholarship Program and charter school reforms have been nothing short of remarkable. In 2005, 61 percent New Orleans students attended a failing school. Now only 6 percent of New Orleans students are in a failing school. Right before Katrina, during the 2004-2005 school year, New Orleans had a graduation rate of 54.4 percent. The graduation rate for New Orleans is now 77.8 percent -- which tops the statewide average for all students (which just reached an all-time high at 72.3 percent) -- and the national average for African-American students.

Since 2007, the percentage of students in New Orleans who are reading and doing math at grade level has more than doubled. And, New Orleans is the number one ranked school district on the Brookings Choice and Competition Index.

The results we've achieved in New Orleans are indicative of the success we've enjoyed across Louisiana. In addition to graduation rates reaching an all-time high, more of our state's high school students are passing ACT exams and scoring high enough on Advanced Placement exams to earn college credit than ever before. We announced earlier this month that Louisiana ranks near the top of the nation in charter school performance.

According to a recent 26-state study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, Louisiana is a national leader in student achievement at charter schools, ranking near the top in both reading and math gains.

CREDO found that, when compared to traditional public schools, students learning at a Louisiana charter school experience gains equivalent to two months of added learning time in reading and three months of added time in math. In New Orleans, where nearly 90 percent of public school students attend charter schools, this figure increases to approximately four months in reading and five months in math. Gains in New Orleans also were more pronounced for students with special needs.
None of these results would have been possible without a commitment to funding K-12 education and rewarding good teachers. Since we took office, we have increased spending for K-12 education through the state's Minimum Foundation Program from $3.13 billion in January 2008 to $3.44 billion in July 2013. We also included an additional $69 million in the 2013 budget -- half of which went to teacher pay raises -- raising that number even further to $3.51 billion. That's an increase of 12.29 percent or $384,268,446 since January 2008. As a result, average teacher salaries in Louisiana have increased by more than $2,000 over the past five years.

By championing education reforms that helped pave the way for a new and improved post-Katrina New Orleans, we have successfully laid the groundwork for improved student outcomes across our state. The hard work of students and teachers in New Orleans hasn't just completely rebuilt a fledgling school system -- it has inspired our entire state.

We still have more work to do, but we are heading in the right direction and this generation has the chance to be our state's best generation yet.

Bobby Jindal is governor of Louisiana.