NEW ORLEANS-STYLE EDUCATION REFORM:
A Guide for Cities
LESSONS LEARNED 2004–2010

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The New Orleans system: principles, results, and history

PRINCIPLES OF THE SYSTEM

New Orleans is functionally the nation’s first charter school district, with nearly 80 percent of public school students attending charter schools in the 2011–12 school year. This number is expected to rise to more than 90 percent in the coming years. The development of the New Orleans system involved a radical restructuring of the roles and responsibilities of nearly all stakeholders. NSNO identifies five overarching principles that define the New Orleans decentralized system of autonomous schools:

1. The Role of Government: Government should regulate and monitor, and rarely directly run, schools. Most significantly, government must ensure equity across the system.

2. The Expansion of Great Schools: Great schools should be given the opportunity to replicate and serve more students.

3. The Transformation of Great Schools: Academically unacceptable schools should close or be transformed by new operators.

4. Family Choice: Families should have choices among schools for their children. Different children will thrive in different education environments, and children should not be assigned to schools without consideration of their own family’s desires.

5. Educator Choice: Educators should have choices in employment, so each educator can work in a school that aligns with his or her educational and organizational philosophies—and so that schools must compete for the best educators.

Underpinning the entire system is the notion that empowering great educators within an effective governmental accountability regime can lead to transformational results. New Orleans is not a command-and-control district model. Moreover, the New Orleans system has also evolved away from the district-run school autonomy model—a strategy that runs the risk of significant central office interference and reduces entrepreneurial activity by keeping all activity under government management. Great entrepreneurs do not launch organizations that are directly managed by the government. If districts truly believe in autonomy, they should grant real autonomy.

Given this structure, the New Orleans system no longer relies on the strength of an individual superintendent. Rather, it relies on entrepreneurship, innovation, accountability, and empowerment to drive continual progress. In making this shift, New Orleans has moved its education system closer to the more dynamic sectors of our economy. Equally as important, the city has given power back to its educators and families.

Results Through 2011

NEW ORLEANS CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE ACHIEVED IMPRESSIVE GROWTH IN STUDENT AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE:

+ New Orleans decreased the city-state achievement gap by more than half—from 23 percentage points in 2005 to 10 percentage points in 2011 (see Figure 1).
+ The District Performance Score (DPS), a measure based on student proficiency, attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates in all New Orleans schools, increased 49 percent since the storm.*
+ Between 2005 and 2010, the dropout rate for all New Orleans schools was cut in half.**
+ The performance gap between African-American students in New Orleans and all of Louisiana was reduced by 100 percent.†
+ The rate of growth, particularly in Recovery School District (RSD) schools, far outpaced state growth averages; the percentage of students at grade level in the RSD increased by 25 percent between 2007 and 2011, compared with a 7 percent average state increase during the same period.‡
+ The percentage of New Orleans students attending schools identified by the state as “Academically Unacceptable” reduced from 62 percent in 2005 to 10 percent in 2011 based on the 2005 definition. If the 2011 standard is used, the percentage of students attending academically unacceptable schools reduces from 78 percent in 2005 to 40 percent in 2011 (see Figure 2).

** Sources:

Figure 1: New Orleans Closes City vs. State Proficiency Gap by 56% in 5 Years

BASED ON PERCENT OF ALL STUDENTS BASIC OR ABOVE (PROFICIENCY GOAL) ALL GRADES, ALL TESTS

Note: Based on All Grades, All Tests (E, M, S, SS), 2005-2011 is a five-year timeline due to start school year of 2005-06
Source: LA Department of Education Data/Analysis by EducateNow!

The improvement in New Orleans schools has been remarkable, but the work is far from done. More than half (56 percent) of New Orleans students performed proficiently or better in the 2010–11 school year. Compared with 35 percent of students at grade level proficient standards.

While dedicated educators worked to sow seeds of change, the city did not empower and support reform-minded educational entrepreneurs and charter operators. A dearth of private-sector industries and limited local philanthropy further hindered reform efforts. The small number of charter schools that existed before Katrina drew on talent from within Louisiana and a fledgling relationship with Teach For America (TFA), but dramatic growth seemed unlikely. The legislation that created the RSD, however, was enacted before Hurricane Katrina in 2003, and it was this legislation that allowed for the state takeover of New Orleans schools after the storm.

**HISTORY: PRE-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS**

In 2005, the New Orleans public school system, governed by the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), was the lowest performing school district in Louisiana. Almost two-thirds of New Orleans public school students attended failing schools. Parental choice was limited. The district went through eight superintendents in eight years and was nearly bankrupt. Schools were in poor physical condition due to lack of proper maintenance. The FBI had set up an office inside the OPSB’s building to investigate multiple cases of fraud.

quickly, the New Orleans educational system became a magnet for educational entrepreneurs, both locally and nationally. Veteran New Orleans educators led the first wave of turnaround charter schools. Today, many of the city’s best charter schools boast experienced leadership, and the city’s early gains were driven in large part by their work, as well as by the other veteran educators they attracted back to the city. As the reform work progressed, additional school leaders, teachers, and entrepreneurs moved to the city. In New Orleans, educators had choices about where to work. Most important, they had control over how to work. Such total freedom existed in no other public education system in the United States.

Alternative certification organizations such as TFA and The New Teacher Project (TNTP) recruited annual cohorts of highly motivated teachers. TFA was fundamental in supporting New Orleans’ leadership needs. Today, numerous schools, nonprofits, and governmental offices are led by TFA alumni, including John White, RSD Superintendent.

Individual schools and networks became magnets for leaders and teachers as well. Well-run charter school operators attracted talent due to mission-driven leadership, and they retained talent through sound management. “In 2011, now that we’ve had success, the talent comes to us,” one charter school leader noted. “They self-identify. It gets easier every year.”

Sarah Usdin, the founder and CEO of NSNO, described the early reform effort after the storm: “There was a broad spectrum of deep commitment to ensuring public education would be done differently. There was no one person who drove what happened here, there were many people taking roles in setting high standards.” Perhaps most striking was the political alignment maintained through the efforts: Both Democratic and Republican officials championed the need for reforms.

**HISTORY: MATURE MARKET (2009–PRESENT)**

In 2010, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute ranked New Orleans as the most reform-friendly city in the country.

The number of charter schools grew steadily over the next four years. By the 2008–09 school year, just three years after the storm, 61 percent of the city’s public school students attended charter schools. Certain charter schools, such as those operated by the KIPP network, achieved breakthrough results and raised the standard for all schools. Though the early years were chaotic—with families still recovering from the storm, and school resources and staff in short supply—early gains in student achievement bolstered efforts to continue the chartering of RSD schools.4

The innovations in government, human capital, and charter schools worked, albeit imperfectly. In a nation that suffers from mixed charter school quality, relative charter school quality in New Orleans is strong, as measured by a rigorous evaluation by CREDO (the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University).

Yet the systems to support quality schools are incomplete. New Orleans policymakers are now, and perhaps belatedly, building comprehensive citywide systems to address the following challenges:

- **Human Capital**: New Orleans must maintain a sustainable supply of high-quality educators while increasing its focus on educator development. Achievement gains will plateau if educator skill does not increase. Education leaders at the city, charter management organization, and school levels must rethink educator roles, career paths, and development to promote both retention and growth.

- **School Development**: New Orleans must both transform the remaining low-performing direct-run and charter schools, and increase the number of college and career preparatory operators. Overall charter sector quality is relatively strong compared with traditional public school performance, but absolute student achievement remains low. Additionally, the city needs diverse school options—including career and technical opportunities with high academic standards—to meet the needs of all students.

- **Citywide Structures**: New Orleans must establish a long-term governance model to effectively support a decentralized system, with a greater focus on charter oversight and equity assurance. All students must be served at the highest levels to ensure equity and access. Families need support to navigate the decentralized system, and communities must be engaged to build citywide support for continued growth of high-quality charters.

Specifically, New Orleans faces the following significant challenges:

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The Role of New Schools for New Orleans

In a decentralized system, nongovernmental entities serve a critical role. New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) formed after the storm to accelerate and support the city’s educational reforms. NSNO—with other citywide and statewide organizations, such as the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, Educate Now, the Cowen Institute, and the Urban League—has assumed many government-related functions, including resource coordination, policy development, and system-level strategic visioning.

NSNO works across three areas: strategic leadership, school development, and human capital support organizations. The Investing in Innovation (i3) award, which brought $33.6 million ($28 million in federal funds and $5.6 million in private matching funds) to New Orleans and Tennessee, provides a strong example of how NSNO has influenced the reform efforts. The New Orleans i3 Project, which was developed with the RSD, lays out a charter strategy in which the lowest performing 5 percent of schools will be transformed each year by charter operators. All told, the bottom quarter of New Orleans schools will be turned around over the course of the five-year grant. The i3 model aligns government, the nonprofit sector, and charter schools to execute an aggressive strategy to serve the city’s most at-risk students.

NSNO’s strategy, while remaining broadly consistent since its inception, has changed as the city’s context has evolved and is detailed below:

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<tr>
<td><strong>STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP</strong></td>
<td>+ Supported a high bar for charter authorization, including failing school closure</td>
<td>+ Support RSD in building system-wide processes to ensure equity</td>
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<td>+ Promoted charter school development as a key strategy</td>
<td>+ Promote citywide focus on academic excellence to prevent settling for “better than before”</td>
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<td><strong>SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT</strong></td>
<td>+ Incubated 10 stand-alone schools to increase number of quality operators in the city</td>
<td>+ Primarily invest in existing operators with a proven track record to expand their reach</td>
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<td>+ Support the community engagement process for transforming underperforming schools</td>
<td>+ Incubate limited number of new operators to continue innovation</td>
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<td><strong>HUMAN CAPITAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS</strong></td>
<td>+ Invested primarily in teacher and leader recruitment organizations</td>
<td>+ Increase investment in educator development organizations</td>
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<td>+ Maintain reduced levels of recruitment investment support</td>
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As policymakers consider adopting New Orleans-style reforms, they should devote significant attention to building a comprehensive, nongovernmental system of organizations that support charter school quality and growth. Government should not have sole responsibility for all policy, investment, and strategy functions.