Recovery School District will be country's first all-charter district in September 2014

Danielle Dreilinger
The Times-Picayune
December 19, 2013

The great educational experiment in New Orleans is taking a dramatic, albeit long-awaited, turn. New Orleans' Recovery School District will become the country's first all-charter system in September 2014, a year earlier than planned.

Superintendent Patrick Dobard announced Thursday that he would cut short the phaseouts at Sarah T. Reed and George Washington Carver high schools in eastern New Orleans, which currently have juniors and seniors. The system had already decided to close its final two elementary schools -- A.P. Tureaud and Benjamin Banneker -- this June. It is graduating the final Walter L. Cohen class in June.

Of the 89 public schools in New Orleans, only five will not be charters next fall, all under the local Orleans Parish School Board. The city already has by far the highest charter school enrollment in the country, with 85 percent of its public school students in the schools, which are publicly funded but run by largely independent boards.

The state's decision to go all-charter in New Orleans has implications for the rest of Louisiana. Dobard said the Recovery School District would run fewer and fewer schools in Louisiana, and would either close schools or do full-school charter transformations rather than trying to gradually phase out schools, because district officials have learned that doesn't work.

And it has implications for the rest of the country as well, because the system has become a national example. Tennessee and Michigan have created their own state takeover districts, and other states are considering it.

Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the conservative Fordham Institute think tank, marveled at the news. "Don't mess with success!" he said. "We will now have a full experiment" for others to learn from. "There will be important lessons -- once the charter sector is the main game in town."
The Recovery School District was created in Louisiana in 2003 to transform persistently failing schools. It started small in New Orleans, taking and chartering only five of the many eligible schools. However, Hurricane Katrina triggered a massive takeover: All but 17 of the city's schools were handed over to the state. And while the initial goal was to create charters, the system found itself having to open and run schools to meet demand. At its peak, the Recovery School District ran 34 schools directly.

The balance began to shift, however, as the charter community's capacity increased. This year, the system has five traditional schools and 59 charter schools. The Recovery School District also runs or oversees schools in Shreveport, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena and East Baton Rouge.

Dobard acknowledged that he had previously promised Carver and Reed juniors they would be able to graduate with their class in June 2015. However, he said administrators realized that gradually cutting down the schools grade by grade wasn't giving anyone a good experience. Reed was unable to field a football team this September, and the schools cannot offer a full range of classes.

Discussion has raged this month about the future of Sarah T. Reed, with community members pleading with the Orleans Parish School Board to find a way to take the school back and keep it open.

Still, "I don't anticipate much pushback, if any, because everyone is expecting it," Dobard said. "Everyone knows the transition was happening. The transition is just happening a year earlier."

Alumni and some community members have decried the loss of many of the city's historic high schools, which the Recovery School District has closed, merged or never reopened after the storm, including L.E. Rabouin, John F. Kennedy and Booker T. Washington.

Dobard emphasized that neither Reed nor Carter is disappearing. Two new charters are operating in eastern New Orleans under the Carver imprimatur: Carver Collegiate Academy and Carver Preparatory Academy. Design work will start this winter on the new Carver High School campus in the Desire area.
As for Reed, Dobard said there would be a school in that building in the long term. "We want to create a great high school at the Sarah T. Reed site," he said. No charter operator has been chosen; Dobard said he is open to talking with the School Board or anyone who has a plan. KIPP Renaissance will continue to use the Reed building temporarily next year.

At least one force behind the Reed protests still felt optimistic. "It's definitely a setback for us, for the community, but we're very hopeful for the future of Sarah T. Reed," said Minh Nguyen, director of the Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association. He said they looked forward to developing a vision for the school with the Recovery School District and Orleans Parish School Board.

Petrilli, of the Fordham Institute, said the Recovery School District has succeeded in improving education in New Orleans, and also has made important strides toward guaranteeing fairness, including equal opportunity for students in special education to choose their schools. "These leaders in New Orleans have been very thoughtful about the infrastructure you need to make this kind of a system work well," he said.

He foresaw the same all-charter future for other school systems that are leaning heavily toward charters, including Detroit, Washington D.C. and possibly Kansas City. "New Orleans is getting there first, but I'm suspecting it won't be the only one" in five years, Petrilli said.

Taking the local perspective, advocate Karran Harper Royal thought the decisions showed "a total disrespect" for children in the Village de l'Est neighborhood of eastern New Orleans, where Reed is located. "This is a clear indication of how the Recovery School District in New Orleans is not listening to the public," she said. "I guess this is what you get when you don't have elected control of your school dollars."

The Recovery School District is nominally overseen by the partially elected, partially appointed state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Harper Royal was also concerned about the 440 students at Banneker. It was the default destination for students from James Weldon Johnson elementary, which the Recovery School District closed this summer. "Again, another instance where decisions are not being made in the best interests of children," she said. "Anyone caring
about children would be concerned about destabilizing the matriculation of children twice."

John Ayers, director of the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, thought it showed the need for the Orleans Parish School Board to choose a strong superintendent to lead the big conversations. Dobard said Thursday the system was still focused on issues of truancy, fair enrollment, special education and alternative schools.

But Ayers questioned the Recovery School District's ability to fund those endeavors -- despite the City Council agreeing Thursday to send Harrah's New Orleans Casino dollars to staff a new truancy center -- on the two percent administrative fee it collects from charters.

"They're moving on. They've got more fish to fry," Ayers said.

Ayers did think, however, that the near-vanishing of traditional public schools from New Orleans would usefully shift the focus from school type to school quality. "When you no longer have the competition between traditional district schools and charters, then ... you start to say, 'What's a good school?'" he said.

The Recovery School District's decision does require some practical tweaks to enrollment mid-year. New seniors were allowed to sign up for Carver and Reed this fall in the early round of OneApp, the city's centralized enrollment system. Data was not immediately available for how many had done so.

Last year, students at closing traditional schools were generally given a default assignment to another Recovery School District traditional school. This time, students at Banneker, Carver, Reed and Tureaud will receive top priority to any Recovery School District school with open seats, even above siblings of current students. Dobard said he would ask the Orleans Parish School Board to give priority to its schools as well.

The system is also hiring two full-time counselors to work with the high school students through June 2015. Dobard said the New Orleans City Council gave approval Thursday for the system to use Harrah's New Orleans Casino funds for that purpose.