New Orleans goes all in on charter schools. Is it showing the way?

Nine in 10 students attend charter schools in New Orleans, which sought to transform failing public schools after hurricane Katrina. No other US city has gone so far down the charter path. Here's a look at the results so far.

Stacy Teicher Khadaroo
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Ever since the floods from hurricane Katrina demolished large swaths of New Orleans nearly a decade ago, the city has been reinventing itself – perhaps nowhere more radically than in its schools.

In so doing, New Orleans has become a sort of district-less school district, the first of its kind in the nation, in which the vast majority of students attend charter schools – free public schools that operate independently through a contract with the state or local board.

The results are drawing national attention.

Gone is a traditional central district office that assigns students to schools, hires and promotes teachers in negotiation with a union, and controls everything from budgets to textbooks. Instead, families here choose among charter schools citywide that – in exchange for their autonomy – have to meet certain benchmarks in order to have their charters renewed.

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Test scores and graduation rates have climbed steadily. And while there are fewer public school students than before the storm – 43,000, down from 65,000 – the demographics are similar: 90 percent African-American (compared with 94 percent pre-Katrina) and 82 percent low-income (up from 77 percent).

A surge of extra resources has helped: In 2010-11, for instance, per-pupil spending in New Orleans was about $13,000, compared with just under $11,000 statewide.

With 9 out of 10 students here attending charters, national policymakers are watching the New Orleans experiment closely. They're looking for lessons – from both its successes and its stumbles – as more urban districts see significant growth in the share of students opting for charter schools.
Nationwide, only about 5 percent of public school students attend charter schools. But in Detroit, 51 percent attended charters in 2012-13, and in Washington, D.C., 43 percent, reports the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Another four cities topped 30 percent.

In Tennessee, Memphis and Nashville are already replicating some of New Orleans’ approaches, supported by a federal grant to turn around their lowest-performing schools. Missouri’s board of education is considering a New Orleans-style takeover of the troubled Kansas City schools, replacing the district administration with a slimmer office that contracts with nonprofits to run schools.

As other attempts to improve chronically bad schools have failed, a coalition of political and educational leaders has grown in some cities that is “willing to consider more dramatic approaches,” such as a reliance on charter schools, says Bryan Hassel, codirector of Public Impact, a pro-charter education consulting group in Chapel Hill, N.C. New Orleans is part of the reason, because it’s a place where these "wholesale changes … have been tried and have shown some promising results," he says.

Charter expansion: exciting, or troubling?

In theory, charter schools let parents “vote with their feet,” creating a market-based approach that promotes competition among public schools and pushes them to improve.

But they’ve been controversial because as students migrate to charters they take public dollars with them. Critics say that can leave the students with the most needs concentrated in the traditional school system. In addition, the fact that some charter school operators are for-profit companies has led some critics to warn that charter schools, like vouchers, are just another way to “privatize” public education. Another source of resistance is that teachers in charter schools typically aren’t unionized.

While many charter school advocates are conservatives, a growing number of Democrats – including President Obama and many advocates for disadvantaged families – have become supportive of the charter school idea.

In Louisiana, only nonprofits and local school boards are allowed to run charter schools. But with charter schools so heavily dominating the landscape here, questions are being raised about the very nature of public education. "When charter-schooling got kicked off 20-plus years ago, it did something fundamentally different – it said that school districts … weren’t the only ones that were able to run public schools," says Andy Smarick, a partner at the nonprofit Bellwether Education Partners in Washington.
Now, the question is becoming whether districts have to run any schools, he says, because New Orleans has shown that "we can move government out of running schools" and have it focus on oversight instead.

What's lost in that, some say, is the historical purpose of public schools as a community endeavor that strengthens American democracy. When an elected school board no longer runs a city's schools, it "eliminates that space … where parents, educators, and public officials talk about what do we value for 'our' kids," says David Meens, an instructor in community studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

The transformation

Louisiana's Recovery School District was designed in 2003 to turn around the state's worst schools. Before Katrina struck in 2005, the local Orleans Parish School Board had longstanding problems ranging from corruption to near-bankruptcy, but the RSD controlled only five of its 128 schools. After Katrina, the state gave the RSD control of 107 more schools, leaving high performers under local control.

Ever since, the RSD has been on a steady march to turn schools over to charter operators. By the start of the coming school year, 100 percent of the RSD schools in New Orleans will be charters. The RSD has also shut down or not renewed the contracts of six charter schools for failing to meet standards.

"Our model is about empowering educators that are closest to the children, to give them the autonomy to have great schools, but to have a strong accountability system in place," says RSD Superintendent Patrick Dobard. One of the RSD's key roles is "ensuring there is equity and access throughout the whole system."

There are mechanisms for shutting down failing schools in traditional districts, but it is rare. In theory, it should be easier with charters because they typically have a contract for five years that can simply not be renewed. But states don't have uniformly high standards or the willingness to enforce them, because "closing schools is incredibly hard even when it is exactly the right thing to do," says Timothy Knowles, an education professor at the University of Chicago.

In New Orleans, "they've been pretty diligent about who they've allowed to even come in and open a school, and more timely in encouraging people to close shop if they haven't met their goals," says Todd Ziebarth, vice president for state advocacy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools in Washington.
The academic gains have been dramatic. The city has surpassed the state average for high school graduation by several points, with 77.8 percent of the class of 2012 graduating within four years – up from just over 54 percent in 2004.

One measure regularly used in Louisiana is the Growth School Performance Score, which is based on test scores, graduation rates, and other factors. Based on those scores, in 2004-05 only 12 percent of students in New Orleans attended 'A' or 'B' schools while nearly 75 percent attended 'F' schools, reports New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), a nonprofit that incubates and supports charter schools. By 2012-13, just 17 percent of students were in 'F' schools, while 34 percent were in 'A' or 'B' schools.

Yet another bright point: the percentage of students qualifying for college scholarships from the state based on ACT scores and grade-point averages. Prior to Katrina, less than 6 percent of students in 14 high schools later taken over by the RSD qualified for these scholarships, NSNO reports. In 2013, 27 percent did.

While there's still a long way to go, "on the whole, the schools are unequivocally better," says Michael Stone, a spokesman for NSNO.

How it works: Inside Sci Academy

Luther Hughes exemplifies the opportunities that open up in high-performing schools. Neither of his parents has a college degree, but as a senior at Sci Academy, a charter school, he's already taken four Advanced Placement classes.

As Luther accompanies this reporter on a tour of his school, teachers congratulate him on his acceptance to Loyola University in New Orleans, one of several he's considering.

Sci Academy offers a structured – some say strict – environment and a supportive "advisory" system in which one teacher gets to know a group of students closely over four years. All staff can enforce behavior incentives and demerits. Support staff in the halls can quickly defuse many issues and get students back to class, while mental-health professionals are available to address deeper problems.

Luther remembers a tough transition as a ninth-grader. "It was frustrating, because in the freshman hall you have to walk in straight lines … and for the first three weeks of school we couldn't talk in the hall…. I wasn't used to having structures and rules put around me," he says. But the rules allowed him to focus. By contrast, "in my middle school, we did anything we wanted…. The teachers didn't really instruct. They gave us workbook pages."
At each grade level, students at Sci gain more freedom, and by senior year they are expected to work in an atmosphere that mimics college. In an Advanced Placement environmental science class, students in groups representing loggers, farmers, and environmentalists practically jump out of their chairs as they debate how to manage rain forest resources. For a seminar on innovative change, Luther is trying to persuade the public defender’s office to hire an advocate for youths who are arrested but eventually found not guilty – to help with the traumatic effects of incarceration.

The discipline policies of Sci Academy’s parent network, Collegiate Academies, don’t sit well with everyone. Three families withdrew students in December from the two newer high schools Collegiate runs in the city. The withdrawals pointed to a broader concern among activists that some charter schools "don't have control, so they use repressive techniques like you can't talk in class or in the hall," says local NAACP education chair Katrena Ndang. "Many see it as a way of saying, 'Most of you will be in jail soon, so you need to know how to act,' " she says.

Collegiate Academies chief executive officer Benjamin Marcovitz says that's the view of a vocal minority, while 93 percent of parents said they favor the policies. The dominant atmosphere in the schools is joy, he says. But Collegiate ended after-school detention after parents expressed concern about students going home in the dark.

When autonomous schools need a 'system'

A lack of consistency in discipline – and concerns about too many expulsions – led the RSD, the local school board, and school operators to agree to a centralized office for expulsion hearings in 2012-13. That year, 0.57 percent of students were expelled, a rate lower than the state’s 0.7 percent, the RSD reports.

The early years in New Orleans’ transition revealed another key area that needed systemic coordination: enrollment. Parents were overwhelmed when they had to apply to schools separately and on different deadlines. But since 2012, the OneApp enrollment process has streamlined the task. Parents rank their top eight choices, and a computerized system places each child. But a few of the top-graded schools in the city, not overseen by the RSD, still don’t participate in OneApp.

"It's not a perfect system, but it is better," says Shannon Faulstick, who brought her children to a Schools Expo at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome Feb. 1. "If my daughter had to go to the schools in our neighborhood, we couldn't do it. Those are failing schools, and now we have a choice on where to go."

The choice model "works because if you're not providing what people want, you don't get kids," says Sabrina Pence, co-leader of Arthur Ashe Charter School.
But local activists say choice for students with disabilities isn't so simple. They say some charter school staff don't understand their obligations under federal law, and sometimes simply tell families they don't provide certain services. A pending lawsuit against state education officials on behalf of New Orleans students with disabilities – Berry, et al. v. Pastorek – alleges that they are denied access to equal educational opportunities and often pushed out of schools.

"At the end of the day, charter schools are public schools, and they have to serve all kids.... But making it actually work in practice for the students who need these services has been a challenge" around the country, says Mr. Ziebarth of the charter schools National Alliance.

In New Orleans, school leaders and state officials have more to do along these lines, but "they've tried to be transparent about identifying shortcomings," Ziebarth says.

One trend that could make it easier for charters is the growing number of networks, or charter management organizations, in which a central office supports several schools with such things as maintenance, meals, and even professional development for teachers.

Yet the charter system still faces opposition from those who worry something is being lost.

Local activist Karran Harper Royal, whose children attended schools in New Orleans before and after Katrina, says the shift to charters "feels like something being done to us ... as opposed to us working together to improve public education, which is what I was a part of before 'reform' came.

"Creating an all-charter district takes away choice," she adds, especially for parents who can't get children placed in schools near their homes or people who don't feel charter schools are responsive to their concerns.

*Staff photographer Ann Hermes contributed reporting from the Schools Expo.*