States Creating New Districts to Steer 'Turnarounds'

By Christina A. Samuels

If the job of a traditional superintendent is hard, imagine the complexities involved in building a school system from scratch—especially one composed of schools with some of the most intractable educational challenges.

That's the task facing education leaders in Michigan and Tennessee, which are building special districts to take over low-performing schools this year and next.

And it may become the job of more school leaders, as states work to enact wholesale changes in groups of struggling schools, rather than taking on one school at a time or directly managing established districts.

Both Michigan and Tennessee are drawing on the experiences of Louisiana's Recovery School District, which took responsibility for most of the schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005 and which now includes schools from other districts across the state.

Unlike the managers of previous state interventions in low-performing districts, the leaders heading "turnaround" districts in Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee are working in new, state-created districts that pluck schools from their home districts and put them under an entirely different management structure.

Proponents of the idea argue that removing schools from the bureaucracy of the traditional school district—and, to some extent, from the bureaucracy of direct management by the state—frees those schools to create new and innovative programs to meet students' needs. But experts in administration say these new district-management models may require a new breed of leader—one who has the skill to navigate local political waters in districts that may be distrustful of state efforts and deal with state leaders who may exert pressure to get positive results quickly.

"This is innovation within certain parameters," said Kenneth K. Wong, the director of the Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University, in Providence, R.I. District leaders are expected to show results and have some freedom to achieve them, he said, but they also have to be directly accountable to a state school board or to the governor for outcomes.

"Right now, it is yet another challenge for our leadership pipeline," Mr. Wong said.
Eschewing Ideology

Paul G. Vallas, the best-known of this breed of leader, spent four years overseeing Louisiana's Recovery School District, the oldest of the new special turnaround districts. In the Recovery District, many schools were turned over to charter managers, while others were directly managed by the new entity.

Mr. Vallas said that educators who lead these special districts can't be ideologues, wedded to one particular model of school improvement over another. They have to focus on involving the community in the reforms. And they also have to be committed to returning the schools to their traditional districts, he believes.

"If [school leaders] know the schools are coming back, there's going to be a greater willingness to be supportive of the state-intervention process," Mr. Vallas said.

In Michigan, John Covington, picked as the chancellor of that state's Education Achievement System in August, now faces trying to build a system from scratch. The Michigan district is scheduled to begin operations in the 2012-13 school year, starting with schools in the 73,000-student Detroit school system.

Mr. Covington joined the system after two years as superintendent in Kansas City, Mo., where he drew national attention for pushing through a major school-closing effort to try to put the 17,000-student district on a stronger financial footing.

Kansas City leaders criticized Mr. Covington for leaving the district, which is now set to lose its accreditation in January due to academic problems. But Mr. Covington said he sees the strides that Kansas City made as an example of broader community support.

"What we were able to accomplish in Kansas City in a very short period of time wasn't entirely my doing—it was the community, working in a spirit of cooperation to get that done," he said.

During a break on a trip he and his leadership team took to visit the Recovery School District in Louisiana, Mr. Covington said that he sees his role as making fundamental changes in the one-size-fits-all model he says too many schools now operate under.

"But we're not saying that coming up with something new for the sake of being new is the silver bullet," he said. "We're coming up with something new to provide students with a more appropriate education."

For example, he said, some of the schools that will come under his jurisdiction might operate well as "blended learning" institutions, where students can mix face-to-face and computerized lessons.
But few specifics are in place about the new Michigan district. Though Mr. Covington is talking with other districts in the state, he said the plan for now is to concentrate on Detroit, though the schools have not been named yet.

But he is taking some cues from the Louisiana district.

"They're still not there," he said of the Recovery School District, "but if you look at where they are compared to where they started, it's almost mind-boggling."

**Plans for Tennessee**

Tennessee, meanwhile, has hired Christopher J. Barbic, the founder and president of the Houston-based charter school network known as YES Prep Public Schools, to be the superintendent of the Achievement School District. In August, the district started co-managing four schools in Memphis and one in Chattanooga.

The plan is for the Tennessee district to eventually oversee the lowest 5 percent of schools in the state. Currently, 85 schools are at that level; all are located in Chattanooga, Memphis, or Nashville.

"I'm not walking into a legacy with an existing culture, good or bad," said Mr. Barbic, who was hired in May from the charter network, whose name stands for Youth Engaged in Service. "That's a huge opportunity, but it's a big responsibility."

He said that the lure of system-building has attracted potential leaders who might not otherwise be interested in joining a large education bureaucracy.

At the same time, some of the school leaders in the individual districts have seen reform plans come and go. Mr. Barbic said that it's up to him to prove that this particular form of district management has staying power.

"There's definitely skepticism, and honestly, I think there should be. We haven't done anything yet," he said. "But I do think there's a healthy dose of optimism as well. We want to make sure that we're putting ourselves in a position to get results, and we want to do this slowly and methodically." In that way, Mr. Barbic said, the achievement district is following the example of successful charter operators that generally don't try to open dozens of schools at one time before seeing what works.

It's also important, he added, that these new leaders have direct experience providing a high-quality education to minority students and students who live in poverty.

**Jury Still Out**

As such efforts in Michigan and Tennessee get under way, results from Louisiana's 8-year-old recovery district are beginning to emerge. Before the storm, five New Orleans schools had been converted to charters under the auspices of the Recovery School District. After the storm, the RSD took over all but 17 schools in the district. Those remained under the control of the Orleans Parish school board.
In a report scheduled for release this week, the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, at Tulane University in New Orleans, says that schools in the city that are managed by the Recovery District have shown marked improvement in state test scores, particularly those run by charter operators. Though proficiency is still lower than the state average, the growth has been faster, the report notes.

But the academic performance at the schools directly managed by the recovery district continues to lag. And there's still a question about how the state will help improve performance in regular districts that may still be left with a number of low-performing schools. The Recovery School District has also faced complaints that it was not responsive to parents and that charters were not prepared to enroll students with special needs, said Debra L. Vaughan, the assistant director for research at the Cowen Institute and the lead author of the report.

"Maybe the jury's still out" on whether turnaround districts are the best way to address failing schools, said Ms. Vaughan, though she believes that more states will look at recovery district-style improvement strategies. "With these chronically failing schools, we really can't afford to waste time."

Coverage of leadership, expanded learning time, and arts learning is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org.