

# Whose Choice? Student Experiences and Outcomes in the New Orleans School Marketplace

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In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city of New Orleans, costing lives, destroying property, and displacing many people, most of them low-income people of color. Following this tragedy, an entirely different approach to education was created in the city. Through a set of unusual pieces of legislation, the state took over most of the city's schools, placing them in a statewide Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD terminated the contracts of all of the teachers and eventually closed all of the district-run schools and replaced them with charter schools. The New Orleans RSD exists alongside a now much smaller Orleans Parish School Board, which continues to operate some district-run and charter schools. City-wide, this creates an educational environment like no other in the nation, featuring multiple superintendents, boards of education, approaches to school admissions and operations, curricula, modes of instruction, and procedures for student discipline.

New Orleans is distinctive in a number of ways: not only has it adopted a “portfolio” approach to providing educational options, as a number of other cities have, but it has moved to a system that consists nearly entirely of charter schools. Furthermore, unlike those in other states, Louisiana's charter law explicitly allows some schools to engage in selective enrollment practices that resemble those of private schools—for example, requiring minimum grade point averages and standardized test scores, as well as other criteria, for admission.

This brief summarizes the results of a study that examined the outcomes of the New Orleans experiment in terms of students' and families' experiences as they seek to manage their way through a portfolio of charter schools in this unusual context. We ask: How does this system affect student choices and experiences for different kinds of students? How effective is the system in providing equitable school experiences for students across the city? What are the outcomes of the system in terms of student achievement and attainment?

The study draws on a review of documents and studies regarding the reforms and the operations of the current system; quantitative analysis of administrative data regarding the distribution of students to schools of different types; and extensive interviews with 81 students, parents, community members, and educators in the city.

The complexity of the system parents and children must negotiate in New Orleans is reflected in Table 1, which describes the schools authorized or operated by 4 different entities in the city, and the governance and operational forms that those schools take.

## About This Brief

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana took over most schools in New Orleans, placing them in a statewide Recovery School District (RSD). New Orleans adopted the portfolio district approach and moved to a system that is comprised nearly entirely of charter schools. This brief examines the outcomes of the New Orleans experiment in terms of students' and families' experiences as they seek to manage their way through a portfolio of charter schools in this unusual context. To see the full report, visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1374>.

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**Table 1. Overview of New Orleans Public Schools, 2014-15**

District or Chartering Entity	Recovery School District (RSD)	Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB)	Board of Elementary & Secondary Education (BESE)	Louisiana Legislature
<b>Number and Type of Schools</b>	57 RSD charter schools (open-enrollment)	14 OPSB charters (selective, priority and open-enrollment); 6 direct-run schools	4 BESE charter schools	1 independent school
<b>Governing Body</b>	Each CMO or independently run charter has its own board of directors, which are selected by the CMO or charter, not elected.	Each charter has its own board; all 5 direct-run schools are governed by the elected local school board.	BESE	

**A Stratified System of Schooling**

In order to analyze how the system distributes students across school types, we created a eight-level taxonomy of the different kinds of schools, analyzing them in terms of student demographics (race/ethnicity, poverty as indicated by free or reduced price lunch status (FRL), and special education status), as well as school performance scores (SPS). The taxonomy describes a hierarchy of schools, from most to least selective, within three tiers:

- Tier 1: includes three kinds of OPSB Schools (selective/priority, open-enrollment charters, and direct run);
- Tier 2: includes three kinds of RSD schools (charter, stand-alone, and direct run); and
- Tier 3: includes two kinds of alternative schools (voluntary and assigned).

It is clear that the organization of schools in New Orleans is highly stratified: The school tiers sort students by race, income, and special education status, with the most advantaged students at the top and the least advantaged at the bottom. Only the top two sub-tiers of schools within Tier 1 have any appreciable number of white and Asian students and any noticeable number of students who are non-poor. The top levels of Tier 1 schools have,

proportionately, half as many special education students with disabilities (6%) as those in Tier 2 (12%), which have, in turn, fewer than half as many students with disabilities as those in Tier 3 (26%).

Because schools at the top of the hierarchy largely choose their student body, few students actually have the option to attend these schools, while those schools at the bottom are assigned students who are not chosen elsewhere or who are pushed out of schools further up the hierarchy. The RSD usually places expelled students in the Tier 3 alternative charter schools. These schools represent the last stop for students before being forced out of the school system entirely, or as a reentry point from the correctional system. In fact, a corporation that operates correctional institutions in other states operates one of the alternative charter schools.

The schools that students have access to also differ in terms of quality: Table 2 shows that within Tier 1, 13 of 16 schools are rated “A” or “B” in the Louisiana school rating system, whereas 35 of 43 schools in Tier 2 are rated “C,” “D,” or “E,” and all of the schools in Tier 3 are rated “F.” The tiers and sub-tiers within them are closely associated with a hierarchical distribution of achievement scores as well. (See Figure 1 on page 4.)

**Table 2. Demographic Portrait of New Orleans Schools, 2013-14**

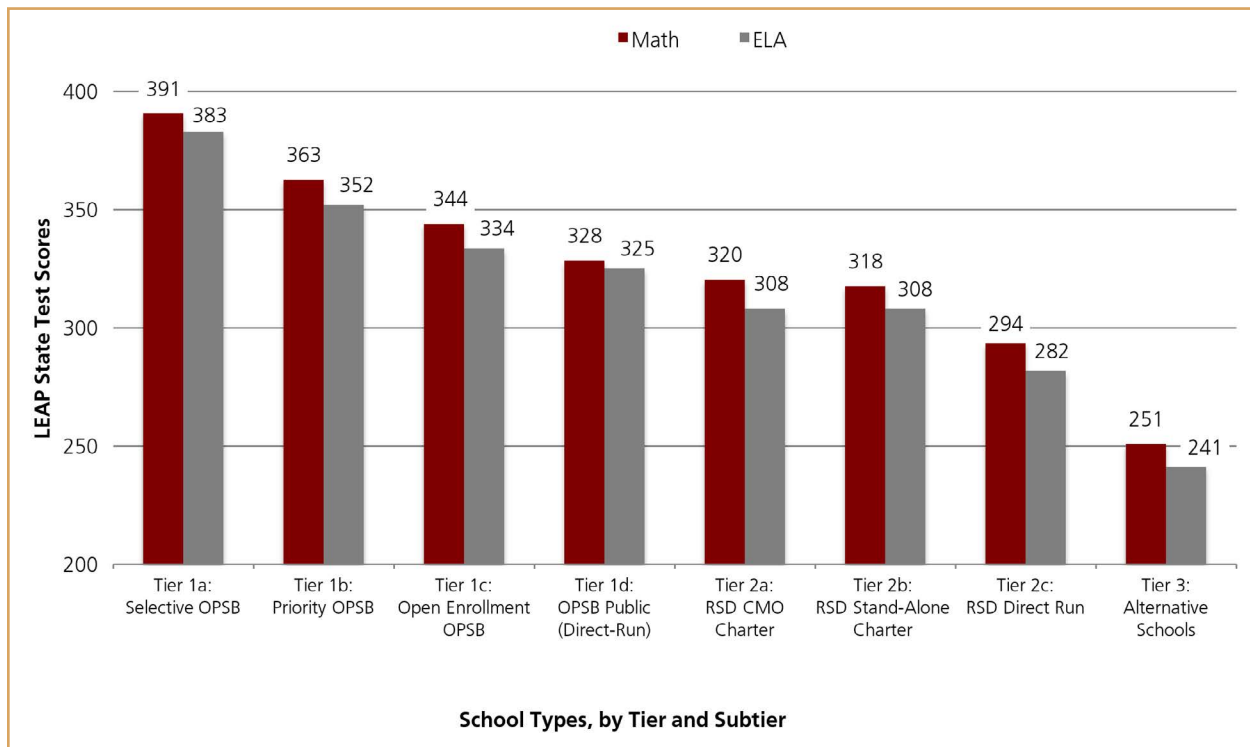
Tier	Hierarchy Rank	District & School Type	Letter Grades	Students #	FRL %	Racial Composition	Students with Disabilities
Tier 1	1	OPSB Charter Selective	A = 6 B = 1 C = 0 D = 0 F = 0	6,620	34.5%	White: 44% Black: 40% Asian: 6% Hispanic: 4%	6%
		Priority Enrollment			82%	White: < 1% Black: 94%	
	2	OPSB Charter Open-Enrollment	A = 0 B = 2 C = 1 D = 2 F = 0	2,683	87.5%	White: 5% Black: 79% Asian: 6% Hispanic: 5%	6%
Tier 2	3	OPSB Direct Run	A = 0 B = 4 C = 1 D = 1 F = 0	2,808	91%	White: < 1% Black: 95%	10%
	4	RSD Charter	A = 0 B = 8 C = 21	28,389	>95%	White: <1% Black: 96% Asian: <1% Hispanic: 3%	12%
	5	RSD Direct Run	D = 8 F = 6	832			
Tier 3	6	RSD Alternative Voluntary	A = 0 B = 0 C = 0	717	83%	White: 0 Black: 98%	26%
	7	RSD Alternative Behavioral Assigned	D = 0 F = 3		63%	White: 0 Black: 99%	

Students of different backgrounds can expect to attend very different tiers of schools. Fully 89 percent of white students and 73 percent of Asian students in New Orleans attend Tier 1 schools. However, only 23.5% of African American students have access to these schools. And whereas 60% of students who are above the poverty line (i.e. those who can pay for their school lunch) attend Tier 1 schools, only 21.5% of students whose family income is low enough to be eligible to receive a free lunch have access to these schools. Not only do Tier 1 schools rank as the best in the city, they consistently rank among the best schools in the state of Louisiana.

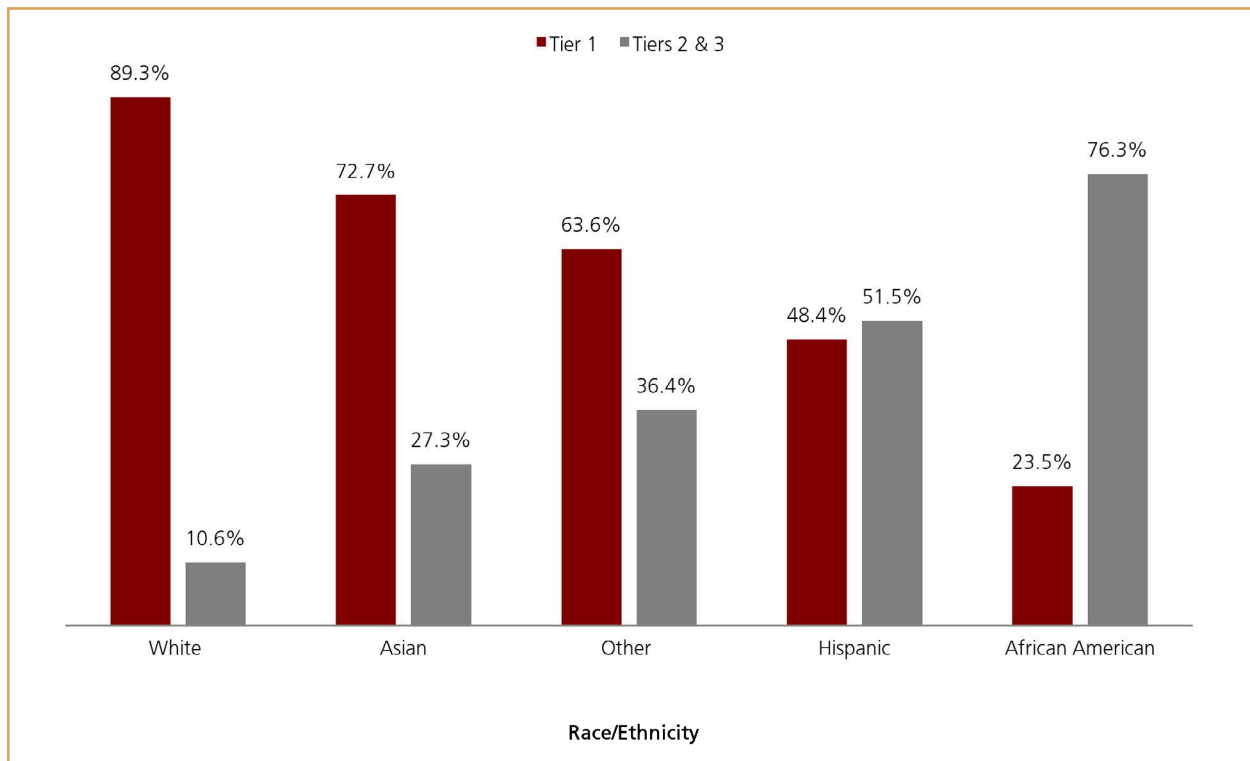
This stratification occurs as a function of both admissions patterns and transfer / exclusion patterns. The top schools not only

have selective enrollment criteria, they are also permitted to ask students who do not maintain a certain grade point average to leave. Similarly, they are allowed to determine which and how many special needs students they admit, often turning parents away because they do not, for example, serve students with cognitive or physical disabilities that require significant accommodations. The students identified as “special education” in the highest performing schools are generally designated as “gifted” or “talented,” and rarely include the kinds of disabilities found in lower tier schools. When schools at the top of the hierarchy disenroll students whose GPAs have slipped, or turn away children with special needs, these children end up attending schools further down on the hierarchy.

**Figure 1: Student Achievement on State LEAP Tests by School Tiers**



**Figure 2: Students by Race/Ethnicity by School Tier**



## Who Chooses?

Although the RSD recently instituted a new OneApp system to provide a more streamlined system of choice to students for open enrollment schools in Tier 2, students and their families continue to have very different experiences of choice. Choosing and being chosen by schools in New Orleans is far from a straightforward process. A parent's desire to send his or her child to a particular school does not result in the child going there. Admission into that school is predicated on a host of factors that are out of the parent's control, such as the neighborhood, the availability of spots, the lottery number if the student is on a waiting list, and the child's academic and behavioral record or special needs. The desirability of the school available to a family is closely related to the desirability of the child from the perspective of the school, including the likelihood that the child will behave well, work hard, and perform well on state tests that are used for accountability purposes and will determine the school's reputation and ongoing survival. As students told us:

This was the only school accepting applications, so I just came here. I was looking for a new school to go to, and every other school was full, but this school was the only school that had spots available. This wasn't my choice at all.

The other school wouldn't accept me because I failed the EOC [End-of-Course Assessment] by one point so I signed up for [this school] and came here.

...(T)he RSD lady told me I had to go to [this school] and I was like, "What? Ain't a couple people got shot there?" and she was like "Yeah."

Students who are viewed as more difficult or expensive to educate are often rejected from

the schools to which they apply. Parents and educators described the ways in which schools discourage special education students from enrolling, often saying they do not provide the right services. A special education expert observed that this results in special needs students "scrambling for limited places." Some parents reported attempting to apply to 20 or 30 different schools, hoping to get a seat. Because of the difficulty such students have had getting enrolled at any school in New Orleans, the Southern Poverty Law Center sued the Louisiana Department of Education in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Although our study was conducted well after that lawsuit, the concerns had clearly not been resolved. The Cowen Institute's 2013 report on the State of Public Education in New Orleans, also noted that, "No single entity is responsible for ensuring students with special education needs are served, making it difficult to track students across schools."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, many such students find themselves pushed out of the schools in which they have managed to enroll. Although RSD adopted a uniform transfer and expulsion policy in 2012 to address the widespread complaints about expulsions, our interviews indicated that push-out strategies continue in many schools. These range from expelling students in October after receiving state funding, to counseling students out, to having students arrested on school grounds and thereby eliminating them without having to expel them. A school administrator described the exclusion strategies used to eliminate struggling students from the rolls of many schools:

[The schools] figured out a way that would get the MFP money, which is the money that follows the Title I students, and then just before testing, which would be October....there were a lot of kids moving around suddenly around that date.... They would literally go and recruit kids out of schools that were scoring better if they could figure

out a way to find them and get them to transfer, and then pushing kids out with disabilities or low scoring [on] tests, so that they wouldn't bring the scores down. They would do that in various ways: It could be saying to the parents, "We don't have the special ed. staff support for your child's needs, and we think you would be better supported in another school, and we'll help you find one, or not," or suspensions and expulsions. The rate of expulsions in various schools is just startling, but it was one way [for schools]...to say "We have an 85% or 90% graduation rate at our high school." But, that figure doesn't represent how many students left in the [previous] years...

Another former educator explained how "force outs" typically occur:

You have a kid where they tell the parent "if you [don't] take your child out of here, then we'll have to go through a whole thing of having him removed [so] you need to take him out and you can choose to put him in some other school." They certainly have used that tactic routinely. Parents don't feel comfortable in confronting a school system when they're told something like that because they know how difficult it was to get their child into a school in the first place.

### What Do Students Experience?

Student experiences in schools are also substantially shaped by school stratification as it reinforces societal expectations for children and young people. In a high-performing school in Tier 1, welcoming signs point to the principal's office, and students, most of whom are white, chat as they move from class to class, carrying books and computers to support their work. Educators describe their work as helping students to learn to think and inquire,

to develop "pure knowledge," and to become leaders. They describe their students as "terrific kids," "highly intelligent," "gifted (and) lucky." They offer them a wide-ranging curriculum, Advanced Placement courses, and an array of extracurricular opportunities. Discipline is described as focusing on the whole child, "sitting and talking with the kids," "treating them like young adults," and finding ways to identify their needs and support them in learning to engage in responsible decision making.

By contrast, in many RSD Tier 2 charter schools, security guards and metal detectors are stationed at the entrances. Once inside, one may see lines on the floor showing the direction students must walk. In a common setting, mostly African American students walk in silence in a single file along these lines between classes, overseen every 20 feet by young teachers. The students carry no textbooks because they are given none. They eat lunches in silence, track teachers with their eyes, respond only when spoken to, and obey other measures at the risk of entering the demerit, detention, suspension, and expulsion cycle. These "no excuses" schools offer increasingly severe consequences for offenses small and large. A recent study on discipline policies in the New Orleans RSD found that 70% of the students surveyed had been suspended for minor infractions, such as wearing the wrong clothing, being late to class or school, talking out of turn, or engaging in disrespectful behavior.

Although there are certainly schools in Tier 2 that are seeking to create more supportive environments for students, both their leaders and the community members we interviewed describe them as going against the grain. Most commonly, Tier 2 parents described their children's schools as "focused more on discipline than on learning." One said, "They focus more on security and law enforcement than education." Another noted, "In general, the kids just don't look happy...it's like a military environment." Several parents talked



about wanting to find a “less hellish” school option for their children, and some teachers said they would “never want their child in that sort of environment.” Some tier 2 and 3 schools were compared to correctional institutions, given their heavy police presence. One respondent noted:

You don’t want to have your child put in an alternative school where there are 4 or 5 policemen around here all the time and...for doing minor stuff, [students are] winding up in police custody.

It appears that one group of students is being prepared for a world of college and careers in which they will engage in knowledge work that demands critical thinking and problem solving. Others are being prepared for something very different—in their own words, “the military or jail.” Although this is not the norm in all Tier 2 and 3 schools, and some seek to provide students with a restorative approach in the context of a well-rounded education, it is surprisingly common.

Most principals in Tier 2 and 3 describe intensive pressure to focus on basic skills and teach to the state tests, and most parents and students concurred that test preparation was a focus of the curriculum. As one parent and community member noted:

(T)he kids’ experiences are pretty narrowly focused on their acquiring sort of basic skills that will get them past tests and prepare them for kind of a survival of the world that we have. I don’t think that we’re giving kids on the whole experiences that are gonna help them become the kind of thinkers that will be able to change the world that we have...

Many students described school environments in which most of their work was independent seat work or computer-based instruction focused on the test information. At the

same time, some educators described how they were trying not to be entirely driven by those pressures. As one put it:

I think sometimes in the charter movement where the pressure is so extreme to close the achievement gap, you can have kids take nothing but math and English all day. So we work really hard to not be that.

Every respondent referenced the importance of the SPS score in the state’s school accountability system in shaping behaviors. Students understood how scores influenced whether they would be promoted each year or graduate, and whether their schools stayed open or shut down. Principals understood how charter renewal, and in many cases their own continued employment, hinged on the school’s annual scores; parents referred to scores as a way to determine school quality; and teachers viewed students’ scores as a measure of whether they successfully taught the curriculum or not. For many students this influence also determined whether they were welcomed or avoided as potential enrollees and what kind of curriculum they experienced. In the words of one educator, “the incentive structure is based on test scores... and [schools] want to do anything they can to get higher test scores.”

### **School Closure as the Means of Quality Control**

One aspect of this system is the regular closing of “failing” schools, most accurately described as those schools in the bottom portion of the hierarchy that serve the neediest students, which affects some students frequently. Since RSD’s expansive takeover of OPSB schools in 2005, direct-run RSD schools have been closing or phasing out at a steady rate. Some of these closures were due to the decision that the district would no longer run any schools, and that all would become charters. Others were closed due to academic “failure.” In 2013, for example, the RSD closed nine of its schools (15% of the total) in one year.

The experience for students who attend failing schools that are shut down is disruptive and often discouraging, as these students, whose school was slated for shut down at the end of the 2013-14 school year, explained:

A little piece of me died.

It's like everybody built a connection with everybody in the school and now we have to stop and go somewhere else and we're all going to be separated.

It aggravates me because I'm tired of switching schools all the time. I want to just stay in one school for four years. I want to just get into a high school and stay there. I don't want to keep having to send my record from this place to that place.

Researchers have found that students who are transferred from closing schools lose achievement in terms of their test scores, grades, and attendance in the next year, with longer term negative effects on graduation and college-going. And because the school hierarchy serves students of different income and achievement levels in different tiers, the neediest students are by definition most likely to be in schools that are closed due to low test scores. At least half of these students are moved to other schools that are also designated as “D” or “F” schools. An RSD representative voiced her concern that the district had no safeguards to ensure that students would not get assigned from one failing school to another, or even lost from the system entirely:

I blame it on [the RSD], because the kids at [Tier 2 shut down school] and [Tier 2 shut down school] were filtered from one of the other elementary schools that closed down, and so now they're in another school that's closing down, and they have to move again...A good number of the kids from one of the other elementary

schools that was shut down never reappeared somewhere else.

In the sea of schools in New Orleans, where there is little communication among the different schools that function as mini-school districts, and between those schools and the RSD, students can and do disappear both from the schools and from the district and state data set that is supposed to track them.

## System Outcomes

Studies on the effects of the New Orleans reforms on student achievement vary substantially in their conclusions based on the comparison groups used. Dramatic changes in the population after Katrina have changed the city's demographics, with those who owned their homes and businesses much more likely to stay or come back. Thus it is difficult to make apple-to-apple comparisons to evaluate the effects of reforms. One study has used students from other districts as the comparison for New Orleans students. Though this unusual comparison appears to show gains for students in the RSD and OPSB, the study found that the evacuees who came back to New Orleans did not gain achievement.<sup>3</sup> A separate study reinforced this finding and further found that evacuees did best when they migrated to traditional public schools in other parts of the state.<sup>4</sup>

Two studies compared gains of students in New Orleans and Louisiana charter schools with those of students in “feeder” traditional public schools that had sent students to the charters, but did not include students in the remaining traditional public schools (which are 80% of the total) as part of the comparisons.<sup>5</sup> These studies reported stronger achievement for the charter schools in relation to the feeders. Meanwhile, another study, which looked at National Assessment of Educational Progress data for the full sample of schools, found that traditional public schools far outperformed charters in Louisiana.<sup>6</sup>



A constantly changing set of metrics in terms of how student scores are reported (with recent changes in cut scores and content) and how school ratings are reported (with several sets of changes to the school ranking system) have contributed to competing narratives about the effectiveness of reforms in the years since Katrina. So has the fact that the state allows schools that are brand new, have been closed, or have accepted students from a closing school to be exempted from the accountability ratings for a period of time. Thus, in 2013, when 9 schools opened and 9 closed, and another set of schools accepted students from those being shut down, more than one-third of New Orleans RSD schools, disproportionately lower-performing, were exempted from ratings. In that year the district's improved ranking (from an "F" to a "C") occurred substantially because of these exemptions.

Conclusions about the outcomes of the reforms also differ based on whether OPSB schools are included in the comparison, along with RSD schools. When looked at separately from OPSB, which was not the subject of state takeover and did not include a system-wide conversion to charter schools, New Orleans-RSD (NO-RSD) schools demonstrate very low outcomes. Whereas OPSB is one of the higher-performing districts in the state, the NO-RSD has the lowest high school graduation rate in the state and among the lowest test scores (at the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile of districts in the state). Only 12% of NO-RSD students reached the mastery level on the state test, as compared to 24% of students statewide, and 42% of those in OPSB. ACT scores for RSD students are among the lowest in the state and well below the benchmark for college readiness.

## Findings and Conclusions

1. **New Orleans reforms have created a set of schools that are highly stratified by race, class, and educational advantage, operating in a hierarchy that provides very different types of schools to different types of children.** The most selective, highest achieving, best-resourced and most sought after schools within this system are out of reach of the large majority of students in the public schools in New Orleans. Students' access to schools is limited by their neighborhood, past academic history (skill level, grades, test score performance), specific talents, behavioral history (previous disciplinary actions, contact with juvenile justice system, truancy), and special education designation (gifted or talented vs physical, emotional, or cognitive disability). The most advantaged students attend schools at the top of the hierarchy, while the neediest attend schools at the bottom.
2. **Students' academic and disciplinary experiences are strongly shaped by where they land in the schools' hierarchy.** Schools at the top of the hierarchy are the most likely to offer a rich curriculum, with opportunities for higher order thinking and exploration and where students are treated with support and respect. While there are schools in Tiers 2 and 3 that are also working to provide these kinds of opportunities, the more common experience is a test-based curriculum, often with little interaction among students, enacted in a "no excuses" disciplinary setting that creates frequent punishments that often ultimately lead to exclusion.
3. **Students' degree of choice and ultimate school assignments depend substantially on their demographic and academic characteristics.** Although competition is meant to drive the choice marketplace, schools do not compete for all children: Children who are more difficult to educate are undesirable consumers in an environment where schools need to achieve high test scores to maintain their desirability and their charter to continue to operate. The most advantaged students—

those who are white, non-poor, and/or academically able—have admirable choices among attractive schools. Meanwhile, the least advantaged—those who have special education needs, have suffered traumas, or have challenging home situations—have few, if any, choices they desire, and are actively avoided by schools that are able to manage their enrollments (including many designated as open enrollment). These students take what they are given, and frequently lose it again when they are pushed out or their school is closed. Among the remaining students, some students get lucky in the lottery, while others get lost in the shuffle.

4. **Student experiences are influenced by the test-based accountability system as it influences school curricula and enrollment/push-out practices.** Respondents noted that in many schools, pressures to maintain high SPS ratings drove both an emphasis on test preparation in the curriculum, often to the exclusion of a richer curriculum, and zero tolerance discipline systems that could also become a means to encourage some lower performing students to leave. Managing enrollment, by targeting high-performing students for recruitment and dissuading low-performing students, was described as a key lever in producing or hindering desirable student performance outcomes; if a school could find a way to control its population then it was more likely to secure high achievement on state tests.
5. **Individual good schools have been created in the reform process, but the quality of schools is highly variable.** New Orleans schools include admirable pockets of innovation and instances of high quality instruction. Some schools have created environments aimed at ensuring that students feel cared for and supported in their efforts to expand and achieve their dreams. Unfortunately, these settings are offset by others where students receive little engaging instruction and feel more threatened than supported. Even when caring educators are working hard, they often admit that they do not know how to

accomplish their goals or meet the demands of the accountability system, and there are few sources of learning and support for many of them. As a result, instructional practices across schools are highly variable and decidedly unequal. Without a means to share and leverage good practice, the way school operates for New Orleans children is uneven, unpredictable, and inequitable.

6. **School closure as the primary tool for addressing school quality is problematic, as market-based “close and replace” strategies do not necessarily ensure high-quality school options for the lowest performing and most socioeconomically vulnerable students.** It creates considerable disruption for students and lowers the achievement of those displaced, who often experience multiple changes of schools both because of school closures and because they have been pushed out of schools where they struggled. This creates continual trauma and dislocation for these students. Most cannot get into higher performing schools, whose places are filled, and the schools that replace those that are closed in this highly stratified market are often doomed to be closed as low-performing in a few years themselves.
7. **Studies on the effects of the New Orleans reforms on student achievement vary substantially in their conclusions based on the metrics and comparisons used.** Evaluating the effects of the reforms is difficult because the city’s changing demographics make it difficult to analyze trends with comparable groups over time, and because of changes in state test cut scores and the accountability rating systems that have inflated student and school performance across the state. Studies using different comparison groups provide different views about whether educational outcomes have improved for students in New Orleans. Two studies looking directly at New Orleans evacuees both found that those who returned to New Orleans did not gain in achievement. One also found the most positive outcomes for those who enrolled in traditional public schools elsewhere in the state.

- 8. The New Orleans Recovery School District continues to struggle with poor performance, posting among the lowest achievement and graduation rates in the state.** In terms of achievement and graduation rates, the New Orleans RSD continues to be one of the lowest performing districts in one of the lowest performing states in the U.S.
- 9. School quality and accountability are undermined by the lack of a strong central system in the New Orleans RSD to support instructional improvement and safeguard children’s access to a reasonable quality of education.** The district appears to have difficulty keeping track of students and ensuring that they are enrolled and treated appropriately, particularly with respect to access and services for special education students. It lacks a viable means to enforce norms for instructional practices or how student behavior is treated. In addition, there appears to be little capacity to support cross-site learning and school improvement beyond what charter management organizations can offer to their own schools.

## Implications

New Orleans provides a model to examine the feasibility of a nearly 100% charter, market-based system of schools where school autonomy, parent choice, and high-stakes accountability coincide. This is truly an education experiment on a grand scale, and because New Orleans’ system is unique, the nation is watching. As other cities are deciding whether to emulate, replicate, or avoid similar reforms, the children, families and educators in New Orleans are living on a daily basis through the successes and challenges, opportunities and inequities presented by these policies.

It is not obvious what lessons other districts should draw from this experiment at this point. The greater success of the Orleans Parish School Board, which was not part of the state takeover and was not converted entirely to charters, could be viewed as counter-evidence for the claims that the RSD takeover strategy is a silver

bullet for others to emulate. However, OPSB has benefited from the fact that it now serves few of the neediest students in the city and can manage its enrollments to keep many of those students out.

From a systems perspective, the question is whether the tools available to the New Orleans Recovery School District for reducing the intense levels of segregation and stratification in the system, and creating much more equitable, high-quality educational opportunities, are adequate to the challenge. The RSD grants charter schools relative freedom to design curriculum, instruction, disciplinary approaches, personnel policies, and organizational features within their schools. It has the power to close low-scoring schools and open new ones. But it appears to have little capacity to ensure that students are being fairly admitted and appropriately served, and little ability to address problems of access or quality. It has few tools or resources available to invest in instructional improvement in schools, or in helping schools learn best practices and trade successes with each other—a practice that does occur within some charter management organizations, but that is discouraged among schools in a competitive marketplace. Current incentives operate largely to encourage schools to keep their sources of success to themselves.

Ultimately, successful system reform must be designed to promote high quality school experiences for all students in settings that safeguard children’s rights of access to supportive learning opportunities. In the context of a school portfolio, such a successful reform must also support school improvement in ways that ultimately create a set of schools that are worth choosing, in which every child will choose and be chosen by the schools that meet their needs. That system has not yet been created in New Orleans. Time will tell whether it can be developed. It is likely that acknowledging the realities of the experiences of the most vulnerable children is a necessary first step in that direction.

## Acknowledgments

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. (n.d.). Case docket: P.B., et al. v. Pastorek (summary of legal case). Montgomery, AL: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/case-docket/new-orleans-special-education/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sims, P. and Rossmeyer, V. (2015). *The state of public education in New Orleans: 10 years after Hurricane Katrina*. New Orleans, LA: Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. Retrieved from <http://www.speno2015.com/images/SPENO.2015.small.single.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Harris, D. (2015). Good news for New Orleans. *Education Next*, 15(4). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/good-news-new-orleans-evidence-reform-student-achievement/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sacerdote, B. (2012). When the saints go marching out: Long-term outcomes for student evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4(1).

<sup>5</sup> CREDO (2013). *Charter school performance in Louisiana*. pp. 14-30. Stanford, CA: Author; CREDO (2015). *Urban charter school study: Report on 41 regions*. Stanford, CA: Author.

<sup>6</sup> Lopez and Olson, as reported in Heilig, J.V. (2015). *Should Louisiana and the Recovery School District receive accolades for being last and nearly last?* Tuscon, AZ: The Network for Public Education.