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Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District

2003 – 2011

This publication was researched, written, and produced by: Debra Vaughan, Laura Mogg, Jill Zimmerman and Tara O’Neill with support from Cowen Institute staff.
Public education in New Orleans has endured years of academic, political, and financial failure, and more recently faced the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina.

The reformation of the city’s public education system has produced a unique structure comprised of a decentralized system of schools that is diverse in governance, ideology and opportunity. The impact of the Recovery School District (RSD) and the resulting school and district restructuring played an important role in this transformation.

The creation of the RSD was directly aimed at New Orleans and became the vehicle for the radical change in the city’s public education system. In 2003, Louisiana passed contentious legislation granting the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) the legal right to take over chronically low-performing schools. Schools identified as failing due to test scores and other performance measures were eligible for takeover by BESE and could be handed over to the newly created state-run RSD. Initially conceived as the mechanism for the takeover of individual low-performing schools, the RSD eventually became the instrument for the complete overhaul of the public school system in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. After broad legislation was passed immediately following the storm in late 2005, BESE was able to take over and give the RSD control of more than 100 of New Orleans’ schools, leaving the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) with only 17 schools.

Intended as a mechanism for restructuring and reform, the RSD was never meant to be a permanent part of the public school governance landscape in New Orleans. Instead, the RSD was meant to take control of and turn around chronically failing schools for an initial period of five years. After that time, and assuming adequate school improvement, schools would be released from the jurisdiction of the RSD and returned to their local school board. Chartering schools became a strategy used by the RSD even before Katrina. In 2010, BESE approved a plan that allowed for the gradual transfer of some schools back to local control. As of 2011, the majority of schools in Orleans Parish are charter schools authorized by BESE under the auspices of the RSD, with the remainder being traditionally operated public schools directly run by the RSD and the OPSB and charter schools authorized by the OPSB.

The issues that the RSD faced early on were not easily remedied. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina and subsequent flooding destroyed facilities and wiped out the infrastructure supporting public education in New Orleans. Despite immeasurable chaos, the RSD, under the direction of Robin Jarvis, was able to open schools as students returned to the city in 2005 and throughout the 2006–07 school year. In 2007, upon Jarvis’s resignation, State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek announced that Paul Vallas, chief executive officer of the Philadelphia school district, would lead the RSD. Under Vallas’s leadership, the RSD tackled the various issues associated with rebuilding a devastated school system and creating a diverse portfolio of schools in a complicated, multilayered governance system.
Indeed, much progress was made in the four years of Vallas’s tenure; many operational issues were resolved and fewer students enrolled in failing schools. Yet despite efforts by the RSD, a dual system remains in which some students are better served than others. While some RSD charter schools have become the model for school turnaround, many schools continue to fail their students, particularly those enrolled in the RSD direct-run high schools.

In February 2011, Vallas announced his intent to transition out of his position at the conclusion of the 2010–11 school year. State Superintendent Pastorek announced in April 2011 that John White, deputy chancellor of schools for the New York City school system, would become the RSD superintendent, replacing Vallas. May 9, 2011 was John White’s first day at the RSD. The following day, Pastorek announced his resignation and decision to return to the private sector. The appointment of the next state superintendent will have a significant impact on the future of the RSD.

Early on in his tenure as RSD superintendent, White signaled a shift from the previous administration in terms of both leadership style and district priorities. While it is clear that White will continue the previous administration’s practice of encouraging charter takeovers to turn around low-performing schools, he has increased the RSD’s focus on transparency and community engagement. In May 2011, White launched a 100-day planning process to develop a set of priorities and action steps for the district around the core principles of “excellence, equity, and community.” He convened four task forces of parents, students, educators and the community to gather input to guide his path forward. In September, at the conclusion of the 100-day period, Superintendent White released a three-year strategic plan for the RSD, “What Will It Take?” in which he outlined his 12 commitments to the city. These commitments include increasing the academic performance of the RSD direct-run schools, establishing a diverse set of high schools, and developing a centralized enrollment system.

In this report, the Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives presents a history of the RSD in New Orleans from its inception to the present, including an analysis of some of the issues and policies that have defined it over the past eight years. The report provides an examination of the interplay among the contextual conditions—a failing and bankrupt local public school district, massive devastation following Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures, a federal mandate for state intervention, and dynamic leadership—and the community’s ability to engage and restructure to ensure sustainable change in public education. The report concludes by discussing the continuing role of state intervention and highlighting the issues currently facing the RSD in New Orleans.
The Louisiana legislature passed the law that allowed for the creation of the Recovery School District (RSD) in 2003 in response to the political chaos and poor performance of the public school system in New Orleans.

Prior to the creation of the RSD, the New Orleans public school system was widely recognized as one of the worst performing school districts in the nation. Test scores and graduation rates were dismal, with less than half of all students passing the state's high-stakes standardized tests. The problems, however, ran deeper than the failure to improve student achievement. Management of the system was in disarray. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and its individual members unproductively micromanaged the superintendent and regularly engaged in ineffective and illegal practices in their role of governing the district.

In an effort to address the issues that faced New Orleans, Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) member Leslie Jacobs, a strong advocate of school accountability and the primary architect of the state's accountability system, crafted and supported a bill allowing for state takeover of chronically low-performing schools. Because the proposed legislation required a constitutional amendment, it needed both passage by the Louisiana legislature and approval in a public vote. The legislation, resulting in Act 9, allowed BESE to temporarily take over the management of failing schools and either operate the schools or contract out their operation to charter school operators. While Act 9 was not solely directed toward the takeover of schools in New Orleans, many viewed the 2003 legislation as intentionally aimed at addressing the issues facing New Orleans at that time.

Act 9 garnered support from a varied constituency. Louisiana Governor Murphy “Mike” Foster supported the state's authority to take over failing schools and oversaw a media campaign promoting the reform. Organizational endorsements came from the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Council for a Better New Orleans, the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, and the Council for a Better Louisiana. Proponents argued that state takeover could be the only way to save some schools and their students from chronic failure. A pollster based at the University of New Orleans said that a majority of voters saw the amendment as “aggressive but needed.” Most candidates for governor that year supported the reform, and all candidates for BESE agreed that takeover might be necessary for the state's worst schools, although they differed on how aggressive the state should be.

Act 9 also had strong opposition. Members of the OPSB and the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) were the legislation's strongest opponents. UTNO President Brenda Mitchell raised concerns that teachers would no longer be protected by collective bargaining and that takeover would lead to the privatization of public schools. The Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) strongly opposed the specific clause allowing the privatization of school support services like those provided by cafeteria workers and janitors. The removal of this language from
the amendment, however, quieted most of the opposition from the LFT. The statewide Louisiana School Boards Association expressed mild opposition, but most school boards across the state were unconcerned with the amendment since they felt it primarily affected Orleans Parish. Some opponents in the state House of Representatives questioned BESE’s authority to control schools without bearing responsibility for the costs of facilities and insurance.

In New Orleans, significant opposition existed. Local opponents of the amendment were worried about allowing state officials to control local tax dollars. Others were concerned about the lack of detail regarding how schools would be improved under state control. Many viewed the takeover strategy as experimental and contended that state takeovers had not been proven effective elsewhere in the nation. The Bureau of Governmental Research, an independent research organization in New Orleans, echoed concerns about the lack of evidence supporting takeovers and claimed that the amendment was “weak” because it allowed rather than required the takeover of failing schools. Most viewed the amendment as a thinly veiled attempt to take over the Orleans Parish school system.

Though Act 9 applied to districts and schools across Louisiana, Senate President John Hainkel stated that the bill was intended to address the failure of schools in New Orleans. Schools were considered failing and eligible for takeover based on their state-calculated School Performance Score (SPS). The SPS is based on student academic performance, attendance, dropout rates, and the graduation index. Schools receive a performance label based on their SPS. Schools receiving the lowest performance label, Academically Unacceptable (AUS), for four consecutive years were eligible for state takeover. Sixteen of the 17 public schools statewide eligible for takeover in the first year were in New Orleans, and 34 more—roughly a third—of the city’s schools were labeled AUS and thus likely eligible for takeover in subsequent years.

In 2003, Act 9 was passed by both the Louisiana House and Senate and gained approval from 60 percent of Louisiana voters. The Louisiana Constitution was amended to give BESE the legal authority to take over failing schools across the state.

After the enactment of Act 9, the RSD was established as a division of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) that would have authority to take control of and manage low-performing schools at the direction of BESE. This established the foundation for the state to move forward with the takeover of individual schools that met the criteria established in the legislation, should it decide to exercise its power. The RSD had the authority to directly operate the schools itself, or to contract with universities or non-profit organizations to operate them as charter schools.

The state had little intention of directly operating schools, and neither BESE nor any of the universities in New Orleans had experience running K-12 schools. The University of New Orleans (UNO) was the only entity that expressed interest in doing so. The first school taken over and placed under the RSD’s authority was Pierre Capdau Middle School in New Orleans, which became a charter school operated by UNO beginning with the 2004-05 school year.

At the end of the 2004-05 school year, over 63 percent of public schools in New Orleans had been deemed AUS, compared to 13 percent of public schools across the state. The state took control of four more of the lowest performing schools in Orleans Parish, handing them over to the RSD to be reopened as charter schools by UNO; Middle School Advocates, Inc.; the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP); and the Institute for Academic Excellence, beginning in the 2005-06 school year.

The takeover of a handful of failing schools, however, did little to solve the problems facing public education in New Orleans. The severity of the system’s problems was well understood by public officials at the local, state, and federal levels. The OPSB and the district central office continued to be considered ineffective and corrupt, so much so that in 2004 a special FBI task force was assigned to investigate the school system and 11 district employees were indicted. The high turnover of the superintendent’s position, with two regular and six interim superintendents between 1998 and 2005, and the lack of steady leadership in the administration’s central office departments, allowed corruption, graft, and incompetence to persist. Extensive and long-running financial mismanagement, and the refusal to confront and rectify it, had also taken its toll, and by early 2005 the public school system in New Orleans was declared effectively bankrupt. Weeks later, beleaguered OPSB Superintendent Anthony Amato resigned. Under threat of total district takeover by the LDE, an outside accounting firm was hired in July 2005 to overhaul the system’s finances. Meanwhile, a storm was developing in the Gulf of Mexico, one that would bring these factors to a head and utterly transform the system of public education in New Orleans.
Hurricane Katrina struck on August 29, 2005, less than two weeks after students in New Orleans returned to school.

Approximately 65,000 New Orleans public school students and their families were forced to evacuate the city. District leadership and teaching staff were similarly displaced. The city was in a state of turmoil. Yet the destruction caused by Katrina and the subsequent levee failures provided the state with an opening to take over the majority of public schools in New Orleans. It was Louisiana’s earlier creation of the Recovery School District (RSD) as a vehicle for state intervention that allowed the system of schools to develop in the way it did in late 2005 and early 2006.

Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding caused destruction of public school facilities, displacement of students and educators, and disruption of operations. In the few weeks after the storm, there was no clear direction as to which or even when public schools in New Orleans would reopen, nor was it clear how many students and families would ultimately return. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) met on September 15, 2005, in Baton Rouge and debated not reopening schools at all before the end of the calendar year. Ultimately, they did open schools in January 2006; the first schools to open under the OPSB opened as charter schools. OPSB opted to open the schools as charter schools to take advantage of the U. S. Department of Education $20.9 million grant targeting the repair and expansion of Louisiana charter schools. OPSB President Torin Sanders saw the decision to open schools as charter schools as a way to bring additional funding into his financially struggling district.

The mass destruction and ensuing confusion and uncertainty in the early days after the hurricane were viewed by some as an opportunity to completely recreate a failing urban school system. Governor Kathleen Blanco promised that the state was not going to recreate the public school system in New Orleans as it was before, and said the storm presented a “golden opportunity.” Leslie Jacobs, former BESE member and New Orleans native, said, “Katrina in its devastation really gives the opportunity for a rebirth of a school district…to think it through and start anew.” The prospect of creating a new and better system of public schools was believed to be at hand.

Education experts from across the country were engaged to craft a new course for public education in New Orleans. A group of the nation’s top education thinkers joined Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) representatives to discuss a plan for opening and supporting schools in New Orleans. Mayor Ray Nagin formed the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which created an education subcommittee focused on rebuilding the public education system in New Orleans. The education subcommittee, chaired by Tulane University President Scott Cowen, engaged local stakeholders and national experts to develop a plan to create a school system in New Orleans that would serve as a model for school systems in the 21st century. “The task is a very daunting one, but obviously a very critical one for our city,” said Cowen.
The confusion and urgency in the aftermath of Katrina precluded extensive public input from all stakeholders. As the state moved to take over the majority of schools in New Orleans, there were accusations of opportunism and of failing to consider the community’s needs and desires. Eleven of the 20 state legislators from New Orleans voted against Act 35. The Legislative Black Caucus expressed concerns with the plan—how swiftly it was pushed through the legislature and the lack of community input on the proposal. Representatives from the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) felt Act 35 was an attempt to reduce their influence.

However, strong support for the legislation also existed. In a September 2005 *Education Week* article, national and local experts noted concern that, in the uncertainty following the storm, negative aspects of the old system could reestablish themselves and fresh ideas could fall by the wayside. Supporters of the takeover plan argued that the hurricane presented a unique opportunity to intervene in failing schools and restructure the system to avoid the problems that led to its failures in the past. The need to act quickly and decisively to ensure that schools were reopened for returning students was countered by the equally important need to “explore all of the options available,” advocated State Superintendent Picard. He argued that the LDE could use the best research and national experts to accomplish this goal.

The large-scale state takeover transformed the public school system in New Orleans from a centralized, single-district model of education to a multi-district model (see the appendix for the current governance model). The OPSB continued to maintain jurisdiction over a handful of relatively high-performing schools, while the majority of schools were placed under the direction of the RSD. Moreover, schools placed under the control of the RSD and turned into charters authorized by BESE (Type 5 charter schools) were independent and autonomous local education agencies (LEAs). In addition, some charter schools directly authorized by BESE and not under the auspices of the RSD (Type 2 charter schools) also existed in New Orleans. Katrina provided the opportunity to restructure a broken unified system into a decentralized system with multiple school operators.

The transformation of the district’s governance structure might best be seen as a confluence of ideology, opportunity, and the convenience of legal mechanisms allowing state involvement that existed in Louisiana prior to August 2005.
One of the original and immediate reform strategies employed by the Recovery School District (RSD) was to secure quality charter operators to take over the failing schools.

The state-run RSD recognized that it did not have capacity to operate and turn around a large number of failing schools. Before Katrina and in advance of the large-scale takeover in New Orleans, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) exercised its right to take over failing schools only after charter operators were identified and ready to begin running the schools. The RSD initially envisioned its role as providing oversight to the operators of failing schools that were converted into charter schools. However, after the storm it became apparent that there was not enough time, nor were there enough high-quality charter operators, for the number of schools that needed to open. Of the 44 organizations that applied to the BESE for authorization in 2006, only six were approved to operate charter schools. Therefore, the RSD was forced to transform itself into a district able to directly operate schools, hire teachers and principals, establish a curriculum, and provide all required services and supplies to its traditional, direct-run schools. With little time or resources and a lack of experience running schools, the RSD relied heavily on outside contractors and staff from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) to fill its needs.

A handful of RSD and OPSB charter schools were the first schools to open as residents began to return to the city. In March 2006, registration began at the first three RSD direct-run schools, which were to open April 18, 2006. It was not until just after these schools opened that State Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard announced that Robin Jarvis, LDE assistant superintendent of the Office of Student and School Performance, would serve as acting RSD superintendent with an office based in New Orleans. Before that time the RSD, headed by Rodney Watson, operated as an LDE department within the Office of Student and School Performance based in Baton Rouge. Expanding quickly in order to meet the demand on the ground, the RSD directly operated a total of 12 schools and oversaw a number of charter schools by the end of the 2005-06 school year. Additionally, BESE had begun approving charter applications for schools to open in New Orleans under RSD jurisdiction the following school year.

**RSD Plan: May 2006**

**Main Objectives and Principles**

1. Increase student achievement
2. Promote quality leadership
3. Engage parent & community collaboration
4. Ensure transparency and accountability
5. Provide equal access & equity
6. Develop Recovery School District charter schools
7. Build relationship with the Orleans Parish School Board
Schools under the RSD’s jurisdiction were considered new schools under the state’s accountability system. All OPSB teacher contracts were terminated and teachers were released from their positions in December 2005; with only five schools under the direct control of the OPSB, fewer teachers were needed. Schools under the RSD were reopened as though they were brand-new and were not required to rehire former OPSB staff. Acting Superintendent Jarvis said a priority would be to “hire a strong staff in each school and hold them accountable.” Little emphasis was placed on staffing a large central office at this time.

In May 2006, BESE approved the RSD’s operating plan presented by Jarvis. The plan called for “a small district-level leadership team” and “a streamlined central organization to provide the district with instructional and operational support.” Immediate attention was placed on repairing the infrastructure needed to operate schools.

The limited staffing at the RSD’s central office exacerbated the problems inherent in becoming a fully operating school district within a matter of months. On the first day of school in August 2006, only 10 administrative staff members worked in temporary offices, acting as a “central office” for the district.

Additionally, there was immense uncertainty about the number of students who would return to the city for the 2006-07 school year. In fact, more students came back to New Orleans than initially expected. The RSD initially anticipated 8,000 students at the start of the 2006-07 school year and was ultimately faced with an influx of approximately “25,000 students… expected to enroll in some type of public education in New Orleans” during the fall semester. In January 2007, at the start of the spring 2007 semester, 300 students were put on a waiting list because RSD schools were at capacity. This prompted a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, which led to additional schools being opened mid-semester. Nonetheless, by March 2007, direct-run schools were again at capacity and students were placed in charter schools. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, to accommodate the influx of students, the RSD oversaw 39 schools—directly running 22 traditional schools and overseeing 17 charter schools—serving a total of about 17,600 students; in the fall of 2007, the RSD expected an additional 9,000 to 13,000 students to enter public schools.

A severe teacher shortage was another extreme and pressing issue throughout the 2006-07 school year. The RSD was not obligated to rehire former OPSB teachers. Because a component of the RSD’s school improvement strategy was to focus on teacher quality, applicants to teach in the RSD had to provide proof of licensure, submit an application, participate in a skills assessment that included a writing sample, and interview for the position. Due in part to the process and combined with a severe housing shortage, by August 2006 the RSD had only three weeks to hire almost 200 teachers (40 percent of its entire teaching staff) for the coming school year. Less than a week before schools opened, the RSD was still 177 teachers short of its original goal of “roughly 500 teachers by the first day of classes.” In addition to the continued shortage of teachers, newly hired teachers were resigning because of the poor work conditions. The teacher shortage problems continued through the Spring 2007 semester. The quality of the teacher applicant pool was also less than desirable; prospective teachers were required to pass a basic skills exam, of which “half the test-takers… failed.” Moreover, “one-third of the district’s teachers (were) not certified.”

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**Impact of the Teachers’ Union**

RSD direct-run and RSD charter schools, as well as OPSB charter schools, were considered new schools and were not subject to the contract between the OPSB and the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO). The OPSB declined to renegotiate the contract, which expired in 2006. While UTNO still has a presence, and membership in New Orleans, the union does not officially represent teachers with a collective bargaining agreement with any school or district.
As the New Orleans Times-Picayune summarized in October 2006, RSD schools were faced with a “myriad of problems, including an extreme shortage of textbooks and other supplies, an unreliable bus system, vacant teaching jobs, cold lunches, overcrowded classrooms and all-too-familiar discipline problems [reflecting the] violent culture that infected city schools long before the flood.”

Violence was a particularly difficult issue. For example, violence broke out daily at John McDonogh High School where “about 50 students [were] suspended and 20 [were] recommended for expulsion” in the first six weeks of the school year. The RSD placed security guards, an average of one guard for every 37 students, in schools.

The mental health of students suffered as a result of the trauma associated with the storm. Two out of every five students in New Orleans in fourth through 12th grades suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. Based on analysis of clinical data, researchers found that many students suffered from “predominantly disruptive behavioral disorders with underlying mood and anxiety disorders” and developed developmental/learning problems. These problems were complicated by highly limited support services. Researchers from the RAND Corporation found that many schools were not able to address the mental health needs of their students.

Additionally, concerns arose around schools’ inability to provide students with adequate conditions conducive to learning. Many RSD-operated schools were unable to provide hot lunches and/or textbooks to students.

Also questioned was the fact that no open admission high school had opened in the Uptown neighborhood, one of New Orleans’ least flooded and most populated neighborhood, and that more clean-up work had not been done at flood-damaged school sites.

Overall, the RSD was faced with such extreme chaos that addressing the many problems and identifying potential solutions was difficult. The RSD’s ability to address many issues was further complicated by the state’s procurement process. Although federal dollars were available, there was confusion about how to access the money to address these issues. The RSD was a department within the LDE; as a department and not an independent school district, the RSD had extensive bureaucratic procedures that hindered timely purchasing. Jarvis requested that the Louisiana legislature streamline the purchasing process, thus enhancing the RSD’s ability to reopen schools and to stock them with adequate supplies.

After almost one year of serving as acting superintendent of the RSD, Jarvis announced in February 2007 that she might resign, citing fatigue, separation from her family, and a lack of community support. Jarvis officially left her position at the end of May 2007. At the same time, there was a change in leadership at the state level. State Superintendent Picard died in February 2007 after a battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease, and Paul Pastorek was named the new state superintendent in March 2007. Pastorek, a prominent attorney from New Orleans, served on BESE from 1996 to 2004, including the last three years as president of the board. Pastorek worked closely with Picard as chair of the RSD Advisory Committee and was influential in the development and creation of the RSD. As state superintendent, Pastorek was responsible for appointing the next superintendent of the RSD. He and U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu, also a New Orleans native, identified Paul Vallas as a likely candidate.
The Tenure of Superintendent Paul Vallas

Following Robin Jarvis’ resignation as acting superintendent of the Recovery School District (RSD) in May 2007, State Superintendent Paul Pastorek officially named Paul Vallas as the next superintendent of the RSD.

Vallas was credited with raising student test scores during his tenures as CEO of the Chicago and Philadelphia public school districts, but post-Katrina New Orleans presented a unique challenge. At the news conference announcing his appointment, Vallas acknowledged that he faced the daunting task of “creating a new school system from the ground up.” Under Vallas, the RSD aimed to address the ongoing operational challenges and begin to implement radical change by creating a new system of public education in New Orleans. In August 2010, five years after the storm, Vallas reflected, “We used Katrina as an opportunity to build—not rebuild, but build—a new school system.”

Vallas signed a two-year contract with the district and began the job in late June 2007; he later agreed to stay on at least through the 2009-10 school year. In February 2011, he announced his decision to resign before the end of the school year. After a national search, State Superintendent Pastorek announced that John White, a former deputy chancellor in the New York City public school system, would replace Vallas as leader of the RSD.

Vallas faced a variety of challenges upon taking office. He tried to address the issues that had plagued the RSD the previous years. Among his initial undertakings were hiring staff and organizing the central office, opening enough schools and school buildings to serve the large influx of students, recruiting more talented teachers and school leaders, improving safety and security in schools, and, of course, the underlying goal: raising student achievement in one of the country’s worst-performing school districts. Vallas spent much of his first year focused on these pressing operational issues, but gradually moved toward implementing more significant and lasting reforms.

“We used Katrina as an opportunity to build—not rebuild, but build—a new school system”

- Paul Vallas
A Rocky Beginning

At the June 20, 2007 Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) meeting, newly appointed RSD Superintendent Vallas laid out several of the RSD’s key initiatives, which he hoped would ensure that the next school year would run more smoothly than the last.93 RSD schools opened later than usual in an effort to increase student attendance and give the district time to prepare facilities and recruit more than 500 teachers.94 Furthermore, Vallas described plans to open more than a dozen new RSD-run schools. Finally, he spoke about standardizing the core curriculum, extending the school day, and utilizing community groups to increase school security in RSD direct-run schools.95

Over the summer of 2007, the RSD made plans to open a total of 26 schools, including nine new charter schools recently authorized by BESE, under complicated facilities arrangements that involved both shared spaces and modular campuses.96 Contractors worked furiously to repair and renovate crumbling school facilities and erect modular campuses in time for the start of the new school year.97

The RSD also spent the summer hiring teachers and registering students. Provided with federal funds and through partnerships with nonprofit organizations like Teach For America and The New Teacher Project, the RSD launched an aggressive recruiting campaign, which offered signing bonuses and moving expenses to new teachers.98 The district hired nearly 24 new principals99 and well over 500 new teachers, bringing the total number of teachers to about 1,100—more than enough to ensure Vallas’s goal of a 20-to-1 student-teacher ratio in elementary classes and a 25-to-1 ratio in high school classes, a goal that was also supported by setting enrollment caps at some schools.100 On August 24, 2007, the RSD rallied all teachers, principals, and staff (over half of whom were new hires) at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. Vallas welcomed the audience and told them, “Our objective, quite simply, is to build the best school system in the country.”101

However, a great deal of chaos and confusion continued. Prior to the start of the 2007-08 school year, about 13,400 students were registered during the summer at RSD direct-run and charter schools, an increase of about 4,000 students from the previous year. The RSD reported that 80 percent of their direct-run schools were full and had stopped registering new students.102 However, when the schools opened on September 4, 2007 (two weeks after most Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools opened), only about 60 percent of registered students reported to school, while more than 600 parents lined up at the central office to either register their children for the first time or try to change existing school assignments.103 About 10 percent of students changed their registration during the first week; the RSD processed about 300 transfer requests daily.104 “I remember registering kids for school on the trunk of a Mazda. It was hot that day,” recalled Ramsey Green, RSD deputy superintendent for operations.105 Uncertainty regarding attendance zones and various school locations caused many parents to register at multiple schools. Some families who registered were unable to return to New Orleans for their children to start school as quickly as they would have liked.

Attendance on the second day and for the rest of the first week hovered around 70 percent.106 Because of low student attendance rates, the RSD opened a truancy center the second week of school in concert with the New Orleans Police Department and the Orleans Parish Juvenile Court, and police were sent to the streets to pick up any children caught skipping school.107

In addition, during the school year’s first two weeks, student attendance remained hampered by inconsistencies in the bus system.108 RSD central office staff and transportation contractors worked to ease these transportation issues. Furthermore, federally required special education paperwork109 had been lost due to storm damage at the OPSB offices, and schools were forced to reevaluate students to establish whether they needed special services. Computer system outages and a loss of transcripts also compounded class scheduling difficulties, especially at the high school level.110 The confusion, resulting from a lack of information and student records, caused delays in class assignments across the district.

Safety was also an issue in many RSD-operated schools. Fights and vandalism, fueled in part by neighborhood rivalries and turf issues, continued to be problems. In the previous year, the RSD had contracted with a private security company and placed 335 security guards in 22 schools at a ratio of one guard for every 37 students.111 Vallas, preferring a more community-minded approach, sought to solicit community and faith-based groups to provide social services.112 Vallas hired former New Orleans police superintendent and New Orleans native, Eddie Compass, to manage the district’s security efforts. As RSD executive director of security, Compass placed fewer security guards...
in schools, organized police patrols, and trained staff to have a greater understanding of the specific problems at each school in an effort to curtail violence.\textsuperscript{113} For the 2007-08 school year, they focused on quality and professionalism rather than mere numbers; Compass placed 230 security guards at 30 different locations to reinforce discipline and enhance safety in the RSD schools.\textsuperscript{114}

While the RSD moved quickly to create order and improve student attendance in the district, it had to manage a constant influx of new students as families trickled back into the city. The transition for returning students was somewhat eased by the newly established “welcome school,” opened in November 2007. The “welcome school” was specifically designed to help transition and place sixth through 12th grade students who entered the system late in the school year. Returning students were interviewed by an administrator or social worker, tested to determine their grade level, and assigned to a school within a few days.\textsuperscript{115} An average of 20-25 families passed through the school daily, and as the winter holidays approached, that average increased to 30-35 families a day. About 2,000 additional students enrolled in RSD-run schools between the start of the school year and the winter holidays.\textsuperscript{116}

Despite many logistical hiccups, the RSD was able to get schools ready as students returned for the 2007-08 school year. Although the condition of school facilities, including working bathrooms and functional kitchens, was generally improved over the prior year, construction complications required a handful of schools to open in temporary locations while modular buildings were completed.\textsuperscript{117} Schools were fully staffed with teachers, most of whom were new hires. Despite setbacks, Superintendent Vallas told BESE in October 2007: “I truly believe that it’s been a successful opening.”\textsuperscript{118}

### Progress toward Transformation

While the RSD spent much of the initial months of the 2007-08 school year putting out fires (such as reassigning students from Joseph A. Craig Elementary to nearby schools because of mold\textsuperscript{119}), the district also started to become more forward thinking, less reactive, and more proactive in the turnaround of failing RSD schools. For instance, in October 2007 Vallas presented his spending plan, which focused on financing academic expenses such as technological updates, after-school programs, and smaller class sizes.\textsuperscript{120} Details of the RSD reform agenda were provided to the community through media interviews and public meetings early in Vallas’ tenure. The plans ranged from proposals for rebuilding the operational and educational infrastructure (such as facilities, financial health, and human capital) to academic and instructional investments, such as extended school days and summer school programs.\textsuperscript{121} Vallas also underlined his intent to streamline the registration process for parents, launched a single-page school application in January 2008,\textsuperscript{122} and hosted a school fair for parents in February 2008.\textsuperscript{123} Keeping in mind the vision of a system of charter and charter-like direct-run schools, Vallas encouraged increased autonomy and efforts to recruit new charter school operators to New Orleans.\textsuperscript{124}

### Facilities

Before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans’ public schools were housed in some of the oldest facilities in the country. These buildings had suffered from decades of neglect. Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures caused enormous physical devastation to school buildings that were already in poor condition. Public schools in New Orleans experienced over $800 million in damages due to flood, wind, mold, termites, vandalism, and theft as a result of the disaster.\textsuperscript{125}

Given the drastic need for a plan to rehabilitate school facilities in New Orleans after the storm, the RSD, the OPSB, and BESE jointly set out to develop and implement the School Facilities Master Plan (Master Plan), a comprehensive approach to renovate and rebuild public school facilities in Orleans Parish over the next decade. In May 2007, the RSD and the OPSB announced their intent to partner to create the Master Plan and described the plan as an opportunity to “chart a course for the renovation or reconstruction of all school properties damaged by Hurricane Katrina.”\textsuperscript{126}

In the summer of 2007, before the completion and approval of the Master Plan, school officials saw a need to quickly renovate a handful of schools to open up more seats as student enrollment in the city continued to grow. After intense negotiations, State Superintendent Pastorek announced an agreement with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to use FEMA funding for a “Quick Start” initiative to begin construction or renovation of up to five schools in Orleans Parish by the end of the year.\textsuperscript{127} Community input identified 17 favorable locations. Pastorek’s Quick Start initiative, launched in July 2007, moved forward as plans were unveiled in October for three newly constructed schools and two
transformations. Negotiations with FEMA ensured that the projects would be funded, and construction crews broke ground in December. Using these federal funds, Quick Start sparked the first wave of school construction in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

To elicit community feedback before formulating the Master Plan, the RSD held more than 200 meetings across the city between October 2007 and February 2008. The RSD released a draft plan in August 2008. The plan was estimated to cost $2 billion, most of which came from FEMA and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. In all, the Master Plan called for rebuilding or renovating 68 elementary schools and 19 high schools and “landbanking,” or closing, 52 campuses due to the diminished student population. The OPSB approved the Master Plan on November 6, 2008. Shortly thereafter, on November 12, BESE unanimously approved the $2 billion plan. The approved plan proposed spending nearly $700 million on 30 campuses in the first phase, scheduled to be completed by 2013. By the end of the 10-year Master Plan, based on plan projections, a portfolio of more than 120 rundown schools would be reduced to 87 rebuilt or renovated schools. The RSD would administer the plan, but BESE and the OPSB would still have to authorize each project as part of their annual capital budgets. Additionally, every two years the districts would commission a demographics study in order to review and adjust the Master Plan as necessary.

Both BESE and the OPSB recognized the need for an independent committee to oversee the administration of the Master Plan. In December 2008 and January 2009, the OPSB and BESE, respectively, passed resolutions to create the Master Plan Oversight Committee. The committee’s purpose, according to the charge approved by BESE, is “to provide assurance to the public that all phases of the School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish will be completed on time and on budget, and to assist the OPSB and BESE in the effective implementation of the SFMP for Orleans Parish.” The Oversight Committee’s membership is composed of construction and finance experts and representatives of education and business organizations.

In August 2010, FEMA awarded the RSD and the OPSB a final settlement of $1.8 billion for damages from Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures. This included the almost $700 million initially awarded based on project worksheets submitted prior to the final settlement, and which was used to pay for the Quick Start initiative and portions of the Master Plan Phase One. The RSD, the OPSB, and FEMA negotiated a “lump sum” settlement for all project worksheets related to the construction of New Orleans schools, a major accomplishment and significant boon to public schools. The settlement was possible as a result of a provision in the fiscal year 2008 Omnibus Appropriations Bill written by U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu. This meant that the RSD and OPSB would be able to combine funds from all losses to build a portfolio of school buildings that met the needs of the city rather than simply replacing what was there before.

“We are spending more money. I’m not carrying big reserves or balances, because I’ve got a patient that’s ill, and I need to purchase the medicine to cure that patient.”

– Paul Vallas

Finances

When Superintendent Vallas and his team took over the RSD in June 2007, they inherited a district in financial disarray. Officially, the RSD budget at that point consisted of one page. Superintendent Vallas described the budget that was in place at the time of his takeover as “a pot of money and a bucket of bills.” The team worked over the next several months to produce a budget for the district. The first line-item budget for the RSD was presented to BESE in February 2008 for the 2007-08 school year. Since that time, the RSD has presented an annual budget for its operations to BESE for approval before the start of each fiscal year on July 1.

The budget presented in February 2008 for the 2007-08 school year anticipated that the district would receive $261 million in operating revenues and spend the same amount on operating expenses. This amounted to approximately $22,500 per pupil in RSD direct-run schools, compared to an average operating expenditure of $9,800 per pupil for school districts throughout the state. This figure excluded construction spending but included other expenses officially attributed to hurricane recovery. Taking into account the number of RSD charter schools that opened during that school year, it is likely that some of these expenditures were on behalf of charter schools; however, it is not clear how much since the budget does not provide a clear accounting of which expenditures were on behalf of charter schools.
The Tenure of Superintendent Paul Vallas

In a newspaper interview in March 2008, Vallas justified the higher per-pupil spending by saying, “We are spending more money. I’m not carrying big reserves or balances, because I’ve got a patient that’s ill, and I need to purchase the medicine to cure that patient.”

By the 2008-09 school year, RSD operating expenditures had fallen significantly to approximately $16,100 per pupil in RSD district-run schools, compared to an average of $10,500 for all districts in Louisiana. Again, some of these expenditures may have been on behalf of charter schools; however, the extent is unclear. Expenditures continued to drop over the next two years. In 2009-10, the RSD average expenditure per pupil was $13,200. The steep drop-off in expenditures was anticipated, and indicative of the stability that was slowly being established in the RSD during this time as fewer new schools were being opened each year. Figure 1 shows the current per-pupil expenditures for all public schools in New Orleans (RSD and OPSB traditional and charter schools) and illustrates the impact of hurricane relief funds on current per-pupil expenditures.

In comparison, average national per-pupil expenditures have changed little since the 2007-08 school year, increasing from $10,300 to $11,220. By the 2009-10 school year, per-pupil expenditures in New Orleans began to align with those of the state and country.

While hurricane recovery dollars often went to cover one-time expenditures related to opening schools after Katrina, the district also relied on this revenue to cover recurring expenditures related to operating schools. For example, in 2008-09 the RSD’s budget contained a total of $43.5 million in funding from one-time sources, such as the Immediate Aid to Restart Public Schools (Restart) program. Of that, $31.5 million went to covering recurring expenses such as administrative and instructional costs. Vallas maintained that much of the Restart money was applied toward expenses unique to the RSD, such as over-staffing schools early in the school year in anticipation of an influx of students who would arrive later in the year. As hurricane-related revenue was expended in the follow-

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**Figure 1: Per-pupil Expenditures Over Time, 2001-02 through 2009-10**

![Graph showing per-pupil expenditures from 2001-02 to 2009-10 for Louisiana and New Orleans.](image)

**Comparison of Per-pupil Spending: 2008 to 2010**

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Note: Data on Type 2 BESE charter schools are not included in the New Orleans calculations.
ing years, the amount of nonrecurring funds in the RSD’s budget decreased.

In addition to addressing uncommon costs related to getting schools up and running after Hurricane Katrina, the RSD also implemented reforms that added to school operating costs. Among these reforms were extended school days and an extended school year. In the 2008-09 school year, the RSD extended the school day to eight-and-a-half hours. The extended day schedule was budgeted to cost an additional $20 million (or $1,700 per pupil) in the 2009-10 school year. For 2010-11, the extended school year program was not implemented due to budget constraints.149

Along with changes at the school level, changes in the RSD central office improved financial reporting and accountability. The RSD implemented a new payroll system in 2008 that allowed RSD central office staff to make changes locally rather than through the state department of education offices. By instituting the new system, RSD administrators gradually improved the payroll system and largely solved an issue wherein former employees were still being paid after their employment had ended. After overpaying former employees more than $650,000 from 2007 to 2009, and $91,156 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, the district reduced overpayments to just $656 in FY 2010.150

By 2010, finances for the RSD had begun to normalize. Relatively large revenues and expenditures had stabilized as recovery funds dwindled or expired. The administration made strides to maintain a more efficient central office and improve financial reporting and accountability.

Human Capital

To rectify the teacher shortage of previous years, the RSD undertook a massive ongoing effort to recruit and hire teachers before the start of the 2007-08 school year. As part of his effort to recruit and retain talented teachers and principals, in December 2007, Vallas proposed a pay-for-performance incentive system that would give bonuses to teachers and principals based on school performance scores.151 Teacher recruitment efforts drew talented candidates from around the country. In addition, grants from national foundations such as the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation were awarded to support teacher and principal recruitment programs such as Teach For America, The New Teacher Project (TeachNOLA), and New Leaders for New Schools.152 Many of the RSD’s

New Human Capital Programs Utilized by the Recovery School District

**Teach For America (TFA)**
TFA recruits, selects, trains and supports recent college graduates and professionals to teach for a minimum of two years in New Orleans public schools.

**The New Teacher Project (TeachNOLA)**
TNTP recruits certified teachers (TeachNOLA), and in 2007 added the Teaching Fellows program to recruit, select, train, and support recent college graduates and mid-career professionals to become teachers in New Orleans public schools.

**New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO)**
Funded by a federal grant, NSNO is implementing the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program in RSD schools. NOLA TIF offers increased pay and advancement opportunities for high-performing teachers as judged by student value-added growth and classroom observations. NSNO once served as an incubator for new charter schools and now helps fund the expansion of successful charter networks.

**New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS)**
NLNS recruits, trains, and supports exemplary instructional leaders to become principals at traditional district and charter operated schools in New Orleans.

**School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans (SLC)**
The SLC provides professional development opportunities for school leaders and principals, and recruits and trains new principals through its alternative certification program.

**Dillard University**
In partnership with the RSD, Dillard’s new teacher training program allows any student to train to be a teacher in New Orleans while still pursuing another major.
new teachers came through these programs, which recruit, select, and train professionals and recent college graduates with no previous experience or background in education to teach in public schools. These programs fed, and have continued to feed, scores of new teachers into RSD direct-run and charter schools.

As a result of the incentives and intensive recruitment efforts, the RSD under Vallas had little trouble attracting candidates and had many more applications than available positions for the following 2008-09 school year. A year later, as the RSD closed or chartered a number of schools for the 2009-10 school year, the staffing needs for RSD direct-run schools decreased and the RSD was forced to lay off teachers. Teacher seniority did not guarantee a teaching job, and teachers who lost their jobs due to school consolidation were placed in a surplus pool; the RSD officials suggested that principals give priority consideration to surplus teachers when filling vacancies. Yet charter schools were not obligated to select from the surplus pool and were responsible for hiring their own teachers. The prospects for teachers in the surplus pool were mixed; during the 2009-10 school year, for example, 187 teachers from the RSD were put on the surplus list and just over 100 subsequently found new teaching positions in RSD schools.

The hiring of so many new teachers added to the post-storm controversy. Many veteran teachers, especially those laid off, complained that the RSD and the charter schools under its direction favored young, new teachers over experienced veterans. One teacher summed up the opinion held by many, saying that “people who are proven are being bumped for people who are cheap.” In some ways, the question over which teachers the RSD should hire was also a debate about hiring local teachers versus newcomers from out of state. Questions were raised about the sustainability of hiring so many out-of-state teachers—who may or may not stay for long—when the district could have invested in locals with a deep connection to the community and the children they served and who intended to build their careers in New Orleans schools.

In an attempt to attract local talent to the teaching field, in the fall of 2010, the RSD offered a new solution to train and retain teachers from New Orleans. The RSD entered into a new teacher training partnership with Dillard University. Under this partnership, students work as interns in RSD direct-run schools, hear lectures by RSD teachers, and after graduation from Dillard take a six-week training program followed by the teacher certification exam. The RSD has also invested in a teacher/leadership pipeline through a partnership with New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) to improve teacher development in schools. Funded by a $13.2 million federal grant from the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), a federal program to support the development and implementation of performance-based compensation systems for teachers and school leaders in high-need schools, NOLA TIF offers increased pay and advancement opportunities for high-performing teachers as judged by student value-added growth and classroom observations.

This stance highlights another change made by the RSD during the 2009-10 school year. In support of autonomy, principals in RSD direct-run schools were granted authority over staffing and compensation decisions in their schools. This was already the case for charter schools, but Vallas supported extending the policy to direct-run schools as well. Vallas intended for principals in RSD schools to field applicants and decide whom to hire so they could choose teachers they thought best fit with the staff and the school culture.

Flexible teacher hiring policies were made possible in part by the fact that the RSD had different tenure rules than other school districts in Louisiana. The only teachers eligible for tenure in the RSD were those who were employed by the prior school system when their school was taken over (in New Orleans, former OPSB teachers) and who taught in an RSD direct-run school; they still were required to serve a new three-year probationary period before becoming eligible for tenure in the RSD. New teachers and teachers in charter schools were not eligible for tenure under state law.

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Building a System of Autonomous Schools

In a July 2010 interview with PBS, RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas said, “I am a believer in schools having the freedom and autonomy to make decisions that are in the best interest of the children. And so I support charter schools because charter schools are a vehicle for achieving that type of freedom.”164 Along with State Superintendent Pastorek, Vallas supported the creation of an RSD portfolio of charter and charter-like traditional schools, in which schools received funds on a per-student basis and principals used that money to staff their schools as they liked and pay for whatever instructional methods they chose.165 In October 2007, Vallas announced that he intended for RSD principals to be treated more like leaders of charter schools and have more autonomy in hiring and assigning teachers and support staff and more control over their budgets, starting with the 2008-09 school year.166 Although difficult to implement, the goal was to place critical decision-making in the hands of those closest to the students: principals and teachers.

The idea of autonomous schools complemented the concept of reducing schools’ reliance on the central office, justifying a lean organization primarily responsible for holding principals accountable and closing failing schools.167 Under the assumption that the creation of autonomous, charter-like public schools would release authority and responsibility from the central office and place it at the school level, a conscious decision was made to devolve central administration and scale down central office staff. Vallas cut 26 jobs from the central administration office, from 171 to 145, in January 2008.168

Charter Schools

The major reform strategy of the RSD has been to support the takeover of failing schools, place high quality charter operators to run the schools, and provide facilities and support as needed. Indeed, the number of charter schools in the RSD increased dramatically under Vallas. When Vallas assumed the position of RSD superintendent in July 2007, he took over a district that had 39 schools open the previous school year—22 traditional district-run schools and 17 charter schools. By the fall of 2011, the RSD had under its auspices 65 schools, 16 direct-run schools and 49 charter schools. Under Vallas’s leadership, the RSD expressed support for expanding the role of charter schools. In the 2011-12 school year, charters have an even stronger presence in the RSD with three new charter schools opened and seven direct-run schools closed from the previous school year.

Initially identifying enough high quality charter school operators to transform the vast majority of public schools in New Orleans under the RSD’s jurisdiction presented a unique challenge. New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) played—and continues to play—a key role in carrying out the RSD’s plans to close failing direct-run schools and replace them with quality charter operators. The local organization was started in 2006 in an effort to help support and open the many new charter schools.169 In December 2007, it received over $10 million from national foundations to use to attract teachers, incubate new charter schools, and advocate for greater school quality and accountability.170 In 2010, BESE approved nine new charter schools, several of them from NSNO-incubated charter networks.171

Many charter schools join together to form formal or informal networks. Formal charter networks consist of a single board that oversees a number of schools. Networks can be large and operate many schools nationwide, or they can be local networks with two or more schools in their portfolio. Of all students attending a charter school in New Orleans in 2010–11, nearly half attend schools in networks.

Charter School Enrollment by Network, 2010-11 School Year

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2010
In August 2010, NSNO, in partnership with the RSD, received $28 million from the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program to expand its work in New Orleans and to Tennessee.\(^2\) The grant is intended to be used to turn around the bottom 5 percent of schools by distributing funding to proven charter organizations and developing more groups capable of taking over schools.\(^3\)

Despite the continued focus on securing quality charter operators to take over failing schools, not all failing RSD direct-run schools have been closed or chartered. In December 2008, BESE member Linda Johnson pushed the RSD to take immediate action to improve the academic performance of its direct-run high schools; in response, Vallas expressed his confidence that those schools would be chartered in the next two years.\(^4\) Though eight new charter high schools have opened or added high school grades since 2007, five direct-run high schools that have reported dismal test scores and shown minimal growth continued to operate through the 2010-11 school year.\(^5\) Additionally, chartering a school does not alone guarantee success. Not all charter schools have been able to generate sufficient improvements in student achievement: for example, Tubman Elementary School’s charter was not renewed in October 2010 after it failed to demonstrate academic improvement.\(^6\) In August 2011, BESE voted to revoke the charter contract of an RSD charter school, Abramson Science and Technology Charter School, following allegations of misconduct—the first time the board used this power.\(^7\)

In response, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) presented a proposal to increase the RSD’s oversight role for their charter schools.

### School Choice

Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, parents had few options for their children beyond the neighborhood zoned schools. The few charter schools that existed in New Orleans as well as a number of “citywide access” magnet schools—some of which were selective admission schools—were the only two forms of school choice available. After the storm, the expansion of charter schools increased the options available. In a system now comprised predominantly of charter schools, widespread school choice has become the norm in New Orleans.

In addition to charter schools, schools operated directly by the RSD are open enrollment, citywide access schools with no neighborhood attendance zones. The decision to institute the districtwide access policy was a matter of necessity in post-Katrina New Orleans, given the patchwork nature of both the flood damage and the residential area recovery, which concentrated returning students and less-damaged schools unevenly throughout the city.\(^8\) Due to such uneven and unpredictable residential relocation patterns, dissolution of geographic school zones was codified as policy by the RSD. Any Orleans Parish student, regardless of the location of their residence within the district or their academic ability, was allowed to attend any RSD public school, charter or direct-run, provided that there was capacity at the school. This was a departure from the previous OPSB policy that assigned students to schools according to geographic attendance zones.

School choice is viewed by most New Orleans stakeholders as an important and positive reform. A November 2009 survey, commissioned by the Cowen Institute, found that 99 percent of the public school parents surveyed agreed that being able to choose their child’s school was important.\(^9\) Choice has, however, come under some fire for the manner in which it was implemented and some of its unintended consequences. Supporters laud the theoretical freedom parents have to choose a better school for their child, and the market principles that result in failing schools being rejected by parents and subsequently closed. Opponents argue that choice exists only for a select few parents—those with greater access to information and resources—allowing a dual system of high- and low-performing schools to continue to exist.
A 2007 report, “Reading, Writing and Reality Check,” issued by United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) asserted that many students are unable to access the city’s better public schools. The report blamed the limited access on selective admissions and “deselection” tendencies at some schools, and on parents’ lack of information about options and inability to maneuver the enrollment process. The 2007 study viewed enrollment caps or class size limits, which inherently favor early applicants, as another way in which access to better schools or schools closer to home is denied. The RSD, in Vallas’s first year, established enrollment caps, or class size limits, that were significantly below the state recommendation: the RSD student-to-teacher ratio was close to 20-to-1 during the 2007-08 school year. By 2009-10, RSD’s target student to teacher ratios were 25-to-1 for kindergarten through fifth grades, 28-to-1 for middle schools, and 33-to-1 for high schools. In 2009, RSD closed enrollment for about 45 of its elementary school classes when the class sizes exceeded the enrollment cap by more than 15 percent.

Additionally, the array of choices confused many parents. One organization received regular calls from parents looking for assistance with enrolling their children in “good” schools, which required both up-to-date information on schools and some level of sophistication on the part of the parent. There is no central body or entity charged with collecting and disseminating this information on all public schools in Orleans Parish, given the bifurcated governance structure and the number of autonomous schools.

These potential problems with a citywide choice system were recognized early, and in 2007, State Superintendent Pastorek suggested a single enrollment process for all schools. A common application and process for all RSD direct-run schools and many charter schools was instituted in February 2008. However, students were only given one month to apply to schools and only about one week after being notified of acceptance to confirm or risk losing their spot. While the common application itself probably eased some of the problems with enrollment, the extremely early deadline, and the fact that parents still had to apply to schools individually, meant that parental sophistication and access to information remained important in exercising choice. However, in 2009 the Cowen Institute conducted a survey of parents. The results did not support claims of widespread confusion among parents; based on the survey, 62 percent of parents agreed that information on school options was readily available. In addition, 84 percent of parents agreed with the statement, “It was easy to register my child for school.” [The common application and process remain in place, but, as of the 2011-12 school year, there is still no central place to apply to RSD charter schools.]

While enrollment in RSD charter schools cannot be denied to a student due to his/her past academic performance, other requirements such as parental participation agreements and early registration have discouraged or restricted some parents from applying to charter schools. RSD direct-run schools, on the other hand, must find a spot for every student who applies. Often, these schools have been considered to be schools of “last resort” for students who either cannot meet admissions requirements or whose parents are unable to successfully navigate the choice system.

Vallas recognized early on that the success of a system of choice required centralized management and implementation. In a 2007 Q&A with Education Week at the start of his first semester as superintendent, Vallas assured the interviewer that by the start of the following school year there would be a “one-stop shop” for application and enrollment that would “break down the myth” that charter schools were for the elite. The topic of neighborhood catchment or geographic enrollment zones was also raised at that time. “I think one of the toughest things for parents to adapt to is that there are no longer neighborhood schools, or, if there is a school in their neighborhood, it’s a charter that may not be able to enroll their child.”

“\textit{I think one of the toughest things for parents to adapt to is that there are no longer neighborhood schools, or, if there is a school in their neighborhood, it’s a charter that may not be able to enroll their child.}”

– State Superintendent Paul Pastorek

The 2009 Cowen Institute survey found that, although parents value the idea of choice, the vast majority of parents (96 percent) and citizens (93 percent) support the right of parents to send their children to the school located in their neighborhood. However, citywide choice, combined with the existence of a number of highly desirable charter schools whose grades fill up rapidly, has
prevented many parents from being able to do so. Nearly one-third of RSD charter schools were oversubscribed for some grades by the 2009 enrollment deadline and were required to hold lotteries.193

Beginning in 2010, the first steps toward reestablishing attendance zones in New Orleans were taken. During the 2010 regular legislative session, two New Orleans state legislators, senator J.P. Morrell and representative Walt Leger, introduced legislation to establish attendance zones. Act 756 by Leger passed during this session and allowed certain charter schools to request the ability to establish a neighborhood preference policy. Beginning with the 2011-12 school year, the policy allows elementary and middle charter schools to request authority to grant admissions preference to students living in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school.194 By the April 2011 deadline, however, no RSD charter schools had applied to establish attendance zones.195 The lack of requests for attendance zones was driven in part by the fact that the application period occurred fairly late in the school year, leaving schools little time to react. Also impacting schools’ decisions was the fact that schools with attendance zones would be ineligible to receive federal start-up funds, on which many rely heavily during the first three years of their existence. Schools may apply for an attendance zone once the grant period for their start-up funds has ended, however. Neighborhood attendance zones could potentially have a significant impact on enrollment and transportation; however, it is unclear what the actual impact will be.

Citywide access to all schools and the absence of neighborhood catchment zones has financial implications for schools. One of the most significant is the cost of transportation. RSD direct-run and charter schools are required to provide transportation to their students regardless of location. In the absence of neighborhood catchment zones, bus routes can span the boundaries of the entire city. A recent study found that only 13 percent of students attend school in their neighborhood of residence.196 Busing students from areas across the city has led to a vast increase in the cost of transportation overall, from less than 4 percent of expenditures before Hurricane Katrina to approximately 7 percent of expenditures in recent years. Yet this was much higher at some charter schools—as high as 13 percent.197 Greater distance and travel time, charter policies regarding student transportation, and the lack the economies of scale influence school-level transportation costs. Given dwindling one-time federal funding and possible level funding from the state in coming years, this increased cost may become increasingly difficult to cover.

The success and sustainability of an all-choice system, a system of schools where neighborhood school zones do not exist, continued to be a contentious and emotional topic of discussion for schools and community members alike. The RSD under Vallas was not able to provide solutions to the issues regarding the all-choice system. The issues of equity and affordability remain and will need to be addressed in the near future.
Upon starting his tenure as Recovery School District superintendent in May 2011, John White represented a shift from the previous administration in terms of both leadership style and district priorities.

Though White is an outspoken supporter of the New Orleans reform model, including the closing of low-performing traditional schools and expanding charter schools, he has worked to increase the RSD’s focus on transparency and community engagement. On May 13, 2011, White launched a 100-day planning process to develop a set of priorities and action steps for the district based on the core principles of “excellence, equity, and community.” The primary purpose of the 100-day planning process was to gather input and recommendations from parents, students, educators, and the community. In addition to the 100-day listening process, White reinforced his commitment to transparency and community engagement by opening Parent-Family Resource Centers, meeting with community members upset about an alternative high school program opening in the same building as an existing RSD direct-run high school, and initiating regular public meetings at low-performing RSD direct-run schools.

Superintendent White also faced some early challenges and made some difficult decisions that suggest how he may lead the RSD going forward. For the first time, teacher layoffs at RSD direct-run schools were based on performance evaluations, resulting in the layoff of 87 teachers regardless of seniority or tenure, in addition to those teachers whose schools closed. He also overhauled the RSD central office, laying off 70 employees and splitting the office into five divisions: a community and policy division to communicate with stakeholders; a services division to help find economies of scale for charter schools; a portfolio division to manage a diverse mix of schools and centralize the enrollment process; an achievement division to improve performance at direct-run schools; and an operations division to coordinate support services for direct-run schools. In late July 2011, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) began an investigation into an RSD charter school following allegations of misconduct and ultimately voted to revoke the school’s charter contract. Under White’s leadership, the RSD held multiple parent meetings to answer questions about the investigation and explain school options for their children. The RSD decided to take over management of the school.

In September 2011, at the conclusion of the 100-day period, Superintendent White released a three-year strategic plan for the RSD: “What Will It Take?” The plan presented the RSD’s commitment to get every public school student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or attain a professional career and was based on the work of four task forces: community members, parents, students, and educators. Furthermore White stated that “most, if not all, of the district’s schools will eventually be charters.” This position will surely lead to changes in the RSD and its role in public education in New Orleans in the years to come.
What Will It Take?
The RSD’s Commitments to Excellence, September 2011

**Excellence**

1. Direct-run RSD schools will improve significantly in 2011-12, achieving greater progress in students achieving basic on LEAP, iLEAP, and GEE tests than the rest of the state.

2. The RSD will implement a new monitoring process for New Orleans charter schools while not distracting educators from educating.

3. The RSD will employ clear, strong accountability for both direct-run schools and charter schools starting in Fall 2011.

4. By Fall 2013, the RSD will establish a diverse set of high school pathways to college and careers.

**Equity**

5. Starting in 2011-12, the RSD will issue an annual Equity Report that will measure and report the things that make a great school truly great.

6. The RSD will develop a citywide enrollment system for direct-run and charter schools starting in 2012.

7. RSD charter and direct-run schools will increase the percentage of students retained from one school year to the next.

**Community**

8. The RSD will make it easier for parents and community members to get information, questions answered, and get issues resolved.

9. In 2011-12, the RSD will make critical decisions regarding school transformations, school locations, building usage, and school closure through public processes and public input.

10. Schools in temporary homes or trailers will have a long-term home identified by the end of the 2011 calendar year.

11. The Facilities Master Plan will serve all New Orleans public school children in a new, renovated, or refurbished facility.

12. Through aggressive monitoring and adjustments in policy, the RSD will maximize the number of local businesses and employees working on the next round of school construction and renovation projects.
The purpose of the Recovery School District (RSD) has always been to turn around chronically low-performing schools and raise student academic achievement and school performance.

The significant presence of the RSD in New Orleans is due wholly to the sheer number of low-performing public schools operated by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) before Hurricane Katrina. The RSD’s ultimate charge was to take over these failing schools from the OPSB and raise student performance as measured by passage rates on standardized tests and schools’ School Performance Score (SPS), a state-generated index that takes into account test passage rates, student attendance, dropout rates, and the graduation index. Overall, the RSD has made progress toward achieving this goal over the past five years.

School performance under Louisiana’s accountability system is measured a number of ways. One common measurement is to consider student proficiency rates on the state high-stakes promotional tests given to Louisiana fourth, eighth and 10th graders in English Language Arts (ELA) and math—the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tests and the Graduation Exit Exam (GEE) tests. The results place students in one of five levels: Unsatisfactory, Approaching Basic, Basic, Mastery, or Advanced. Students scoring at least Basic on a particular test are considered to be meeting grade-level expectations in that subject. Though lower scores in combination with a Basic score in ELA or math can still allow students to be promoted or graduate, scoring at the Basic level or above on one subject’s test is generally considered “passing” that test.

Schools reopened by the RSD—both direct-run and charter—have made gains in student performance on the LEAP and GEE exams, with data from the 2007-08 school year used as a baseline. Although a number of RSD direct-run and charter schools opened prior to the 2007-08 school year, it is used as a baseline in this report because before that time, schools were in flux with students arriving continuously throughout the school year. During the 2007-08 school year, both operations and the student population began to stabilize. Table 1 provides the percentage of students scoring Basic or above and illustrates the absolute performance of first-time test-takers in RSD direct-run and charter schools, and RSD schools as a whole, for Spring 2008 and 2011, as well as the percentage point growth in student performance.

### Louisiana Standardized Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)</strong></td>
<td>High stakes tests administered in grades 4 and 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrated LEAP (iLEAP)</strong></td>
<td>Tests administered in grades 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 that assess student knowledge of LA standards and rank students against the skill levels of students across the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduate Exit Exam (GEE)</strong></td>
<td>High stakes tests administered in grades 10 and 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table illustrates the gains in the percentage of students passing the high-stakes LEAP and GEE exams. All RSD school types (direct-run and charter) in all grades and subjects saw double-digit growth over the three-year period in the percentage of students passing the exams. In 2008, RSD charter schools outperformed RSD direct-run schools on all LEAP and GEE assessments. Both types of schools, however, reported significantly lower scores than the state average. Between 2008 and 2011, RSD schools on average increased the percentage of fourth graders scoring Basic and above in English Language Arts by 15 percentage points, compared to a 5 percentage point increase in the state average. In math, the RSD schools made extraordinary gains, with an increase of 30 percentage points on average, relative to the state’s gain of 4 percentage points. For fourth grade math, RSD schools reported a 15 percentage point increase in the percentage of students scoring Basic and above, while the state increased its percentage by 4 points.

Results for eighth grade are similar. In 2008, the eighth grade scores for RSD schools are significantly below the state average but make impressive gains. Between 2008 and 2011, RSD schools on average increased the percentage of eighth graders scoring Basic and above by 15 percentage points, compared to the state increase of 5 percentage points in English language arts. For fourth grade math, RSD schools reported a 15 percentage point increase in the percentage of students scoring Basic and above, while the state increased its percentage by 4 points.

High school GEE results for first-time 10th grade test-takers are akin to the eighth grade results. In 2008, the GEE scores for RSD schools were significantly lower than the state average. Between 2008 and 2011, the RSD schools, on average, increased the percentage of 10th graders scoring Basic or above on the English Language Arts GEE by 22 percentage points, compared to a 2 percentage point increase in the state average. In math, the RSD schools made extraordinary gains, with an increase of 30 percentage points on average, relative to the state’s gain of 4 percentage points. Again, the achievement gap on the math GEE between RSD charter schools and the state average was eliminated by 2011; both reported 69 percent of students scoring Basic and above.

In addition, from 2007 to 2011, the growth in test passage rates among RSD schools on all standardized tests (LEAP, GEE, and the iLEAP given to third, fifth, seventh, and ninth graders) was greater than the state average and that of the other four large school districts in Louisiana. Figure 2 shows the overall growth from 2007-11 of the state, the RSD, Orleans Parish Public Schools, and the four other largest school districts. Again, the RSD in New Orleans far outpaced the state’s gains, and those made by Louisiana’s four largest districts: Caddo Parish, East Baton Rouge Parish, Jefferson Parish, and St. Tammany Parish. The RSD in New Orleans more than doubled the percentage of all tests passed by its students—from 23 percent to 48 percent, a total of 25 points—while the state grew six points over the same period of time.

Table 1: 2008–2011 Performance of RSD New Orleans Public Schools (Direct-Run and Charter)

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEAP: 4th Grade</td>
<td>RSD Charter</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RSD Direct-run</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All RSD</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louisiana Average</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAP: 8th Grade</td>
<td>RSD Charter</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RSD Direct-run</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All RSD</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louisiana Average</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEE: 10th Grade</td>
<td>RSD Charter</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RSD Direct-run</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All RSD</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louisiana Average</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2008 and 2011
In addition to passage rates on standardized tests, the state assigns each school a School Performance Score (SPS). The SPS, calculated by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE), is used as a measure of absolute school performance and a means of calculating the growth schools must achieve to make Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. SPS is based on student performance on all the state tests (LEAP, iLEAP, and GEE), dropout rates, attendance, and the graduation index. Scores range from 0.0 to 236.4 or 266.7, depending on a school’s grade configuration. Through the 2009-10 school year, the LDE gave a school with an SPS of 60 or lower the performance label Academically Unacceptable School (AUS), and a series of “stars” to schools with an SPS above 60 [see chart at right]. Beginning with the 2010-11 results, LDE no longer used the star rating system but assigned schools a letter grade based on their SPS. Additionally, the threshold to be considered Academically Unacceptable (now an F on the letter-grade scale) was raised to 64.9. The SPS is frequently used by education stakeholders and the media as an accurate and more complete measure of a school or district’s performance than test passage rates alone.

School Performance Scores are based on the following calculations:

- **K-5 schools** – Attendance (10%), Assessment (90%)
- **K-8, 7-8 schools** – Attendance (5%), Dropout (5%), Assessment (90%)
- **9-12 schools** – Graduation Index (30%), Assessment (70%)

Schools opened by the RSD, both direct-run and charter, have shown progress in raising their SPS and moving out of the AUS performance category. Figure 3 shows the percentage of RSD schools (direct-run and charter schools) placed in the Academically Unacceptable category. Based on SPS for the 2007-08 school year, 65 percent of RSD schools performed in the unacceptable range. This percentage declined only slightly during the 2008-09 school year. By the 2009-10 school year, as operational issues diminished and charter schools became more established, the percentage of schools performing in the unacceptable SPS category declined to around 34 percent. For the 2010-11 school year, 36 percent of RSD schools received an F grade, making them Academically Unacceptable. However, this was the first year that the bar was raised to 65. Had the threshold remained constant, at 60 points, 22 percent of RSD direct-run and charter schools would still be considered AUS.

During the 2009-10 school year, the LDE introduced a new performance category, Academic Watch, to identify schools in danger of failing when the SPS threshold for AUS is again raised to 75 in 2012-13. For the 2010-11 school year, 18 percent of schools earned scores that placed them in the Academic Watch category.
The Impact of the RSD in New Orleans on Student Achievement and School Performance

SPS, yet there continued to be a wide range in individual schools’ performance. For example, the SPS at RSD high schools ranged in 2011 from a high of 96.4 to a low of 28.8.

The RSD’s overall impressive academic gains are tempered somewhat by the poor performance of its direct-run high schools. Following the massive takeover of public schools after Hurricane Katrina, the RSD inherited 18 underperforming, non-selective enrollment high schools; of these, all but two were chronically failing. In fact, four of these schools had an SPS in the teens out of a possible 266. In 2005, 71 percent of all high schools in New Orleans were deemed Academically Unacceptable based on their SPS; in 2011, that number had decreased to 43 percent, a drastic improvement. These gains came as a handful of successful elementary charter schools gradually expanded to serve high school grades, and new charter high schools opened. Student performance in these new or expanding charter schools has been encouraging. All RSD direct-run high schools, however, remain at the Academically Unacceptable level and continue to be the lowest performing schools in the state. RSD direct-run high schools enrolled more than 20 percent of all public high school students in New Orleans in the 2010-11 school year.

An analysis of the percentage of students attending failing schools shows overall that fewer students were enrolled in failing schools. In the fall of 2004, prior to the RSD takeover, 71 percent of public school students in New Orleans were attending schools considered AUS or failing. By October 2010, the percentage of students attending RSD direct-run or charter schools that eventually received a failing grade for the 2010-2011 school year had fallen to 33 percent.

Predominantly, the performance of the RSD charter schools has contributed to the RSD’s gains in standardized test performance and School Performance Scores. In 2010-11, 65 percent of students attending RSD direct-run schools were enrolled in schools that were considered failing; this was true for only 22 percent of those students enrolled in RSD charter schools in 2010-11.

Based on their overall performance as measured by SPS, charter schools generally have been viewed as a vital key to improving public education in New Orleans and a relatively effective strategy for school turnaround. Figure 4 provides the average weighted SPS for RSD charter and direct-run schools over time. Scores in charter schools have been higher than those in direct-run schools. On average, both RSD charter and direct-run schools made gains in

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Figure 3: Percentage of RSD Schools Considered Academically Unacceptable

![Figure 3: Percentage of RSD Schools Considered Academically Unacceptable](chart)

*Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011* *In 2011, the performance bar for Academically Acceptable schools was raised from 60 to 65. Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, all schools with an SPS below 65 are considered Academically Unacceptable.*

Figure 4: Average School Performance Scores Over Time, 2007 to 2011

![Figure 4: Average School Performance Scores Over Time, 2007 to 2011](chart)

High school graduation and dropout rates tend to follow a similar pattern to that found in academic performance. The graduation cohort rate, which measures the percentage of ninth graders who graduate from high school in four years, is a good measure of high school performance. In the 2009-10 school year, 2,292 students, or 28 percent of all RSD high school students, attended schools where fewer than half of their students graduated in four years. Additionally, annual dropout rates at the RSD direct-run schools, which ranged from 5 to 25 percent in 2009-10, are indicative of the problems that continued to plague these schools.

The RSD recognized that turning around its direct-run high schools would be a challenge. In 2008, the RSD implemented the High School Redesign Program, funded in part by a $6.37 million grant from the Walton Family Foundation and a $275,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This initiative focused on using research-based reform strategies in the five lowest-performing direct-run high schools. Strategies in this reform effort included: implementing a standardized curriculum, increasing instructional time through block scheduling and an extended school day, adding career academies, and strengthening core academic programs.

Beyond the addition of career academies, the High School Redesign initiative was never fully implemented and has not produced the expected results. According to an evaluation conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education during the 2009-10 school year, the RSD “failed to meet any of the nine ‘progress indicators’ for the redesign initiative, including delineating defined leadership roles, showing evidence of classroom management and engaging instruction, and demonstrating the ability to track data.”209 In late 2010, the RSD released a five-page high school strategic plan that focused solely on closing poor-performing schools permanently or reopening them as charters, as well as encouraging high-performing elementary schools to expand to or align with a new high school.210 GEE passage rates from Spring 2011 remained stagnant in English Language Arts and declined 1.7 percentage points in math among RSD direct-run high schools.

Figure 5 provides the percentage of first-time test takers scoring Basic and above on the GEE by school type. Student performance for the RSD charter schools falls below that of the traditionally higher-performing OPSB schools, of which many have selective admissions requirements. On average the percentage of students passing the GEE in the RSD direct-run schools is significantly lower than the passage rates of RSD charter schools and OPSB direct-run and charter schools.

While overall there has been improvement in student achievement for schools under the RSD, there is much work to be done. School performance and student academic achievement, as indicated on a number of metrics, vary widely between schools, whether charter schools or schools directly operated by the RSD.
The Recovery School District (RSD) was created to improve academic outcomes for public school students in New Orleans.

Its task was to take over failing schools and improve their academic performance either by closing underperforming schools, restructuring the schools, and/or attracting charter operators to run schools. The RSD was never meant to be a permanent fixture in the New Orleans public school governance landscape. In fact, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) recently approved a plan that allows schools to transfer back to either the previous governing entity, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), or an alternative local governing entity.

Nevertheless, the RSD continues to have jurisdiction over the majority of schools in New Orleans. In the 2011-12 school year, the RSD opened three more charter schools and closed seven of its direct-run schools, with a focus on eventually leaving the business of directly operating schools in New Orleans. It is clear that the RSD plays, and will continue to play, a vital role in educating the students of New Orleans. Additionally, the superintendent for the last four school years, Paul Vallas, transitioned out of his position in the spring of 2011, and new RSD superintendent, John White, took over the reins. As schools return to local control and White steps in to take over where Vallas left off, the RSD’s role in New Orleans and the role of its superintendent will continue to evolve.

Student Enrollment

By 2009, overall public school enrollment in New Orleans began to level off. During the 2010-11 school year, almost 40,000 students enrolled in public schools in New Orleans, based on October 2010 enrollment counts. Figure 6 illustrates the enrollment patterns by public school type. The enrollment of students in RSD direct-run schools peaked during the 2008-09 school year and has dropped each year as RSD has converted more and more schools to charter schools. The majority of students in public schools in New Orleans attended RSD charter schools during the 2010-11 school year. Further, 71 percent of all public school students attended a charter school (RSD, OPSB or BESE). That percentage is expected to increase in the coming years.

Student Achievement

Progress has been made since 2007 when Vallas rallied RSD staff to work toward creating the “best school system in the country,” yet many challenges remain. The RSD’s ultimate charge was to turn around failing schools and improve the academic achievement of their students. While there has been improvement in test scores and School Performance Scores (SPS) at many schools, others have lagged far behind. The RSD’s strategy for dealing with its lowest performing schools thus far has been to turn them over to charter operators. In partnership with New Schools for New Orleans, the RSD will utilize resources provided
by the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to continue replacing persistently low-performing schools with charter schools over the next five years. With this funding in place, the RSD has the responsibility to help recruit high-performing charter operators, ensure that only those charter operators with proven success are granted charters and funded, and provide the necessary turnaround infrastructure. Ultimately, the RSD is charged with providing a high-performing school for all students it serves, whether enrolled in a direct-run or charter school.

Despite intense efforts to attract and retain high quality charter operators, the RSD will still be faced with low-performing direct-run schools in desperate need of intervention. The RSD has recognized that the performance of its direct-run high schools has been less than encouraging. Based on the commitments outlined in the 2011 strategic plan, the RSD pledged to support and improve its direct-run schools.\textsuperscript{212} The RSD must remain reform-minded in the development of a specific action plan to address the deficiencies at underperforming schools. They must find a balance between providing autonomy and providing the support and training necessary for school leaders expected to take on additional responsibilities, such as budgeting and hiring and firing school staff. It will indeed be a challenge to determine the appropriate blend of school-level autonomy and district-level support and intervention for schools during the time before quality charter operators can be identified and take control of failing schools.

**Equity and Access for All Students**

Ensuring that charter schools are truly open access by holding them accountable for their enrollment policies is critical. Although the RSD has established a common admissions application for the schools they directly run, there is no single resource that describes the process and timelines for submitting applications to individual schools, and the application process varies from school to school. Many charter schools begin accepting applications for the upcoming school year as early as January. Savvy parents are aware of these deadlines and act quickly to secure a space for their children in high-demand schools. Many over-subscribed schools allocate all seats using a lottery system, while some schools only use the lottery selection process to select from students who were placed on the “waiting list.” This process presents a disadvantage for children whose parents miss the application deadline or apply later in the year.

As more direct-run schools become charter schools, holding schools accountable for enrollment policies and procedures that serve all students is essential. To address this issue, the RSD has set out to establish a centralized...
citywide student enrollment system. Based on the timeline presented in the report “What Will it Take?” the RSD plans to begin the centralized application process in spring 2012 for the 2012-13 school year.213

Across the country, charter schools have been accused of failing to adequately serve students with special needs, an issue that has caused a great deal of controversy in the majority-charter, post-Katrina New Orleans school system. Charter schools under the RSD have been accused of failing to enroll special education students in proportion to the percentage of special education students within the entire student population. In 2008, RSD’s director of charter schools, Rob Logan, admitted that charter schools have mixed records at serving special education students; some do it quite well, while others are struggling.214 During the 2010 school year, while charter schools (RSD, OPSB and BESE) enrolled over 60 percent of all public school children, they enrolled only 38 percent of public school students with autism, 37 percent of students with an emotional disturbance, and only about 23 percent of students with multiple disabilities, leaving a much larger proportion of special needs students to be served in direct-run (RSD and OPSB) schools.215 In October 2010, 13 special needs students represented by attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center and Loyola Law Clinic filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court alleging that the New Orleans public schools discriminated against them because of their disabilities. The lawsuit, which came after mediation attempts failed, names the Louisiana Department of Education and state education officials as defendants and names both RSD-run schools and charter schools. Superintendent Vallas admitted that some schools needed to improve in this area and that he was working to address the inequities.216 Additionally, the district faces challenges providing sufficient staff to serve special needs students, especially in charter schools.217 This continues to be an ongoing challenge that the RSD must address.

**Accountability and Transparency**

Another challenge is the lack of transparency regarding the RSD’s relationship with its charter schools. Type 5 charter schools are often referred to as “RSD charters” although they are their own local education agencies authorized by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). Though these schools are authorized by BESE, the RSD does interact with them. The nature of the relationship between the RSD and the charter schools, the extent of the RSD’s responsibility for charter school oversight, and where the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) fits in, is often unclear. Under Vallas, the RSD took a hands-off approach with charter schools. Charter school boards are responsible for oversight of their school. In 2009, charter school financial accountability was put to the test. While reviewing financial audits, the board of Langston Hughes Academy uncovered irregularities and possible theft; they alerted the Orleans Parish District Attorney and the RSD. The investigation resulted in the arrest of the former financial manager, who was sentenced to five years’ incarceration.218 Following the incident, Vallas pledged micro-level accountability of charter schools, saying, “When it comes to financial accountability, they should be micromanaged.”219

Months before the arrival of Superintendent White, the RSD was involved in another investigation. After allegations of cheating at an RSD charter school, the RSD launched an investigation at Miller-McCoy Academy; they concluded that some cheating had occurred.220 The Miller-McCoy Academy board conducted its own investigation, finding no evidence of wrongdoing.221 The state’s policy is that local school districts are responsible for investigating cheating allegations; as a charter school, the school acts as its own district governed by its charter school board. In this particular case, the state did not intervene and the scores were not voided.

White already has been confronted with another issue regarding the RSD’s relationship to, and role in, charter oversight. BESE, as charter authorizer, is charged with oversight and has the authority to renew or revoke contracts with charter school operators under the RSD. In July 2011, BESE was compelled to act on complaints made against Abramson Science and Technology Charter School. Although the school’s charter was revoked, many felt that the school was allowed to operate for too long and that BESE did not have the capacity to be responsive and adequately monitor the many charter schools operating in New Orleans under the RSD.222 As a result, White, along with staff from the LDE, recommended changes to current state oversight for Type 5 charter schools. Recognizing the large number of charter schools in New Orleans and the need to ensure responsive and timely oversight, they recommended that the RSD assume an active role in conducting Type 5 charter reviews. Understanding and articulating the roles and responsibilities of RSD and LDE will be important going forward, especially as the RSD plans to charter more and more of its direct-run schools.
**Facility Assignments**

Transparency in its operational processes and procedures also continues to be a challenge for the RSD. Assigning and providing adequate school facilities for its direct-run and charter schools is an important RSD responsibility. Clarity of the assignment process is vital for community buy-in and support. In early August 2010, the RSD released a draft school facilities assignment plan titled, “School Facilities Assignments/Recommendations.” This document detailed the tentative long-term building assignments for every RSD charter and direct-run school in New Orleans, including where each of the RSD’s nearly 70 schools would be located in the future.223 The school facilities assignment draft was the first document to provide any indication of the future permanent location of existing RSD schools and a basis for community feedback. The final draft outlining facility assignments for the 2011-12 school year had not been released as of October 2011.

Although members of the community were given the opportunity to speak about school assignments during the public comment period, a common criticism has been that no clear rubric is used in facility assignments. The RSD failed to adequately communicate to the community how decisions were made when selecting operators to be placed in certain school buildings, or for construction or renovation priorities. Recognizing the need for a public process and transparency, RSD Superintendent John White has made a commitment to make the rationale for assignment decisions public. The RSD strategic plan established a timeline for when families and community members can provide input. Long-term assignments are scheduled to be announced in January 2012.224 It is an important task and a challenge to implement a transparent process for decisions that broadly affect schools, the community, and education stakeholders. When all parties understand how decisions are made, the RSD’s ability to gain trust from schools, the community, and education stakeholders is enhanced.

**Financial Reporting**

Transparency in financial reporting is another continuing challenge. The RSD budget is complicated by its unique situation operating as a division of the LDE. Most school boards maintain different funds for different types of revenue and expenditures and track operating and capital revenues and expenditures separately. The RSD, because it is legally an LDE division, maintains only one fund, which combines all operating and capital revenues and expenditures. Despite the fact that all RSD funds are combined, the district only presents its operating budget to BESE for approval; no capital budget is presented to the board for approval. The fact that the RSD neither prepares nor presents an annual capital budget is significant given that the district will oversee $1.4 billion in construction funds in the coming years.225

In addition, comparisons between and among schools is excessively difficult due to the lack of standardization in financial reporting. Charter financials are not submitted in a standardized format. Because charter schools individually work with their own accounting firms to prepare their annual audits, there is variation in reporting. Transparency in the capital budgetary process is critical.

**Managing the School Facilities Master Plan**

Orchestrating the terms of the lump sum FEMA settlement and creating a comprehensive School Facilities Master Plan to build and renovate public schools in New Orleans was a monumental accomplishment. Managing the program will be a challenge. The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported in June 2011 that the $1.8 billion FEMA committed was about $300 million short of the estimated cost to complete the projects outlined in the Master Plan at that time due to budget overages.226 In addition, the new and renovated buildings will require ongoing maintenance. The Building Research Board of the National Research Council recommends allocating 2 to 4 percent of current value for maintenance of public buildings.227 It is projected that the school system in New Orleans will need to budget an additional $30 million to $60...
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32 million each year to adequately maintain the newly built and renovated school facilities. This cost projection would apply to all school facilities in New Orleans, not only those used by the RSD, and would be the liability of RSD and OPSB. Currently, there is no state funding mechanism to support school facility maintenance and upkeep. The only source of funding for this purpose currently is the revenue from the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP).

The higher-than-expected construction costs would have required cost adjustments to the original Master Plan or acquisition of additional funding sources. In the summer of 2011, the Master Plan Oversight Committee, in conjunction with the administrations of the OPSB and RSD, released proposed amendments to the Master Plan that would have adjusted building specifications to reduce construction and operating costs. After receiving public input, officials from the OPSB and the RSD asked the Master Plan Oversight Committee and its peer review committees to revise the proposed amendments in a manner that would put even more students in high quality buildings. The revised plan, released in early October, calls for serving the 42,000 to 46,000 students projected to be enrolled in public schools in 82 new or renovated facilities by 2016. BESE and the OPSB both voted to approve the amendments.

The RSD and the OPSB assert that they are seeking federal New Market Tax Credits to raise additional revenue for building construction and renovation. Further, the revised Master Plan will stretch funds further by scaling back some projects, using a common design for elementary schools, and doing more projects that do not require contractors to pay the federal government-set “prevailing wage.” Managing the rebuilding and renovations, adjusting and updating the Master Plan accordingly, and securing additional funds will be a critical process facing the RSD in the future.

Sustainability

The RSD has relied on a combination of local, state, and federal revenues to operate its schools. Since 2005 the RSD and its schools have also received substantial amounts of federal hurricane recovery funds, as well as private funds, much of which have been or soon will be depleted. The 2010-11 RSD budget included a revenue line labeled “MFP and extended day general fund.” This label indicated that the district received state general fund dollars to sustain the extended school day, but before the end of the 2010-11 academic year, the RSD announced the suspension of the extended day and extended year program. This is an example of the uncertainty that exists for the long-run sustainability of reforms when the district is dependent upon sources of revenue not typically available to pay for them.

Many reforms instituted by the RSD have resulted in overall increases in both student academic performance and per-pupil spending. Budget cuts due to depleting one-time funds have affected human capital decisions as well. Cost reductions over the last two years have been based, in part, on closing or chartering schools and reducing the number of teachers in RSD direct-run schools, as well as a general tightening of spending as federal funding has declined. After employing enough teachers to ensure class sizes well below the state cap during Vallas’s first year, the RSD adjusted its teacher-to-student ratios and has gradually employed fewer teachers than would be necessary to maintain those class sizes. As class sizes increased, some teachers have said they felt “helpless” and were unable to give their students the attention they needed. The challenge that the RSD continues to face is to maintain the positive trajectory of improvement, continue interventions that increase student achievement, build capacity of schools, and support teachers with decreasing amounts of revenue.

In addition to the financial pressures of a decreasing revenue stream, a majority-charter district creates certain cost inefficiencies, as each school or charter network must replicate services typically provided by a central office such as food services and transportation. Economies of scale are lost and per-pupil costs rise. There are concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of a majority-charter system. The RSD administration, under White, has been downsized and reorganized to help address these issues. With the creation of the support division, the RSD intends to help charter schools find more cost-effective contracts for many non-instructional services, such as transportation and food services.
The Recovery School District (RSD) was charged with taking over the lowest performing schools in the state and turning around their performance.

This daunting task was further complicated by the decision to take over the majority of public schools in New Orleans in the aftermath of one of the worst disasters in U.S. history. Administrators and employees, of which there initially were few, inherited a one-page budget, a portfolio of crumbling and flood damaged school buildings, and a rapidly returning student population that was academically years behind their peers around the state and the country. Despite these setbacks, the RSD built a central office, opened and staffed schools, recruited charter operators, created a budget, led a process to create a facilities master plan, secured a large FEMA settlement for school facilities, and built and renovated facilities. These major accomplishments are indicative of the hard work and dedication of the RSD leadership and staff. While many operational issues have been tackled, many challenges still need to be addressed. Through this paper, we have considered the history and development of the RSD and provided an in-depth look at some of the issues and policies that have defined it over the past eight years—and will continue to shape the RSD in the years to come.
The Recovery School District in New Orleans Timeline

2003

May 14, 2003
Governor Kathleen Blanco signs into law Act 9, which allows the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to take over the operations of a failing school. The Recovery School District (RSD) is created as the mechanism to do so under the authority of State Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard.

2004

July 1, 2004
Pierre A. Capdau Middle School in Orleans Parish is transferred to the RSD. A Type 5 charter school operator, meaning it is approved by BESE to operate under the RSD, is approved to take over operations of the school beginning in the 2004-05 school year.

2005

May 2005
Four additional schools in Orleans Parish are transferred to the RSD. The schools all open as Type 5 charter schools at the start of the 2005-06 school year.

August 29, 2005
Hurricane Katrina strikes the Gulf Coast. The storm and the subsequent levee failures unravel the operations of New Orleans Public Schools, destroy or damage school facilities, and displace students, teachers, and staff across the country.

November 30, 2005
Governor Blanco signs into law Act 35, passed by the Louisiana legislature during an extraordinary session. Act 35 raises the minimum School Performance Score (SPS) necessary for the RSD to take over a failing school in a district academically in crisis. Subsequently, over 100 low-performing schools in Orleans Parish are transferred to the RSD for an initial period of five years.

2006

January 2006
The RSD reopens three charter elementary and middle schools: Sophie B. Wright, Samuel J. Green, and Pierre A. Capdau. All three schools were chartered prior to Hurricane Katrina.

April 18, 2006
The RSD opens three direct-run schools: Joseph A. Craig and Benjamin Banneker elementary schools and Joseph S. Clark Senior High School.
April 20, 2006
State Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard announces that Robin Jarvis will serve as acting superintendent of the RSD. BESE also approves six new Type 5 charter schools to open in New Orleans in the 2006-07 school year.

September 7, 2006
Now overseeing 17 direct-run and 18 charter schools in New Orleans, the RSD begins its first full school year since Hurricane Katrina. Unfinished building repairs delay the opening of some schools.

October 1, 2006
The RSD has a total of 15,819 students enrolled in its charter and traditional schools in New Orleans, representing 61.7 percent of all public school students in the city.

November 1, 2006
At a joint education subcommittee meeting of the Louisiana legislature, RSD Superintendent Jarvis fields complaints about subpar conditions at RSD schools, including teacher vacancies, a lack of textbooks and supplies, security problems, and slow progress in repairing buildings.

2007

February 15, 2007
State Superintendent Picard passes away from complications of Lou Gehrig’s disease.

March 1, 2007
BESE names Paul Pastorek the new State Superintendent of Education.

May 1, 2007
RSD Superintendent Jarvis announces that she will resign at the end of the month. Shortly after, State Superintendent Pastorek announces that Paul Vallas will be the next superintendent of the RSD.

May 10, 2007
Nearly half of RSD students fail in most fourth- and eighth-grade categories on the state’s high-stakes standardized tests, and two-thirds of high school students fail.

June 12, 2007
OPSB and the RSD award Parsons Corporation and Concordia contracts to develop a School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish, which will guide future school construction and renovation.

June 20, 2007
Newly appointed RSD Superintendent Vallas presents his reform plans and initiatives to BESE. He announces plans to open 12 additional schools for the 2007-08 school year as well as a “welcome school” to help process students as they return to the city. Schools will open after Labor Day.

July 2, 2007
The RSD unveils a $400,000 national teacher recruitment campaign including website, radio, and newspaper advertisements across the country.

July 25, 2007
State Superintendent Pastorek announces that the RSD will use FEMA funding for a Quick Start initiative that will construct or renovate up to five schools in New Orleans by the end of the year.

September 4, 2007
34 RSD direct-run and charter schools open for the first time under RSD Superintendent Vallas.

October 1, 2007
The RSD has 21,648 students enrolled in its charter and traditional schools. Enrollment has increased by over 5,000 students, or nearly 40 percent, from the previous October.

October 2, 2007
RSD officials announce that the Quick Start initiative will include three new and two renovated school buildings located at the Lake Area, L.B. Landry, Langston Hughes, Andrew H. Wilson, and Fannie C. Williams sites. The Fannie C. Williams site is later changed to Joseph A. Craig.

October 22, 2007
RSD Superintendent Vallas announces that, beginning next school year, principals at RSD direct-run schools will have the authority to hire their own teachers and administrators, as well as more control over their budgets.
2008

January 10, 2008
The RSD and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) hold the first of five community meetings to get input regarding the draft School Facilities Master Plan. The meetings are part of over 200 meetings being held to solicit input on school facilities needs in New Orleans.

January 16, 2008
BESE approves the RSD’s pay-for-performance plan that would give bonuses to teachers and principals in schools that achieve a specific score on a state assessment index.

January 18, 2008
17 RSD central office employees lose their jobs under a cost-cutting plan to save about $1 million annually.

February 27, 2008
Student applications for the 2008-09 school year are due according to the new, streamlined common application process. The one-page application is accepted by most public schools in New Orleans and moves up registration for RSD schools by five months from the previous year.

March 20, 2008
RSD Superintendent Vallas announces the RSD’s High School Redesign initiative, funded by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation.

May 6, 2008
RSD schools see improvement across the board on the state’s high-stakes standardized tests. Despite modest gains, however, 60 percent of first-time test-takers at the high school level failed both math and reading.

August 18, 2008
The RSD begins the 2008-09 school year with 33 direct-run and 33 charter schools. RSD and OPSB leaders also officially unveil the draft School Facilities Master Plan.

October 1, 2008
24,901 students are enrolled in RSD charter and traditional schools in New Orleans. The RSD now enrolls nearly 70 percent of all public school students in New Orleans. Half of all students in the RSD attend a charter school.

2009

May 20, 2009
RSD Superintendent Vallas presents a $176 million operating budget for the 2009-10 school year, which includes a 23 percent reduction from the 2008-09 budget.

May 21, 2009
RSD schools see general improvement on the state’s high-stakes standardized tests. As in the previous year, RSD charters outperform RSD direct-run schools.

June 5, 2009
62 RSD central office jobs are eliminated in an effort to save $4 million and continue a shift of administrative power to the school level.

July 22, 2009
The RSD announces the closure of its Welcome School and tells parents to instead contact schools directly in order to enroll.

August 7, 2009
34 direct-run and 37 charter schools overseen by the RSD open in New Orleans to mark the third year with RSD Superintendent Vallas at the reins.

October 1, 2009
The RSD has a total of 26,754 students enrolled in its schools, with over 55 percent of its students attending charter schools. The RSD enrolls 70 percent of all public school students in New Orleans.

November 13, 2008
On behalf of the RSD, BESE approves a revised version of the School Facilities Master Plan. OPSB had approved the plan earlier in the month. The $2 billion construction and renovation plan remains largely unfunded.
January 12, 2010
BESE votes to raise the minimum SPS for Academically Unacceptable status to 65 for the 2010-11 school year and 75 for the 2011-12 school year.

May 27, 2010
RSD schools in New Orleans post the largest gains in the state on the state’s high-stakes standardized tests, increasing by 20 percent since 2007.

August 5, 2010
The RSD releases a draft school building assignment plan that lays out where individual school programs will be located in the coming years.

August 6, 2010
In partnership with the RSD, the local non-profit New Schools for New Orleans receives a $28 million federal grant to recruit and incubate charter operators to take over failing RSD schools.

August 12, 2010
The school year begins for the RSD with 23 direct-run and 46 charter schools, continuing the increase in charter schools.

August 25, 2010
FEMA awards the RSD and OPSB a final settlement of $1.8 billion in a single lump-sum payment to rebuild, renovate, or demolish K-12 public schools that were damaged in Hurricane Katrina. This money will be used to fund the projects outlined in the School Facilities Master Plan.

September 14, 2010
As schools in New Orleans near the conclusion of their initial five-year placement in the RSD, State Superintendent Pastorek and RSD Superintendent Vallas release a proposal for returning the schools to local control.

October 1, 2010
28,212 students, or 71 percent of all public school students in New Orleans, are enrolled in RSD schools. A record 69 percent of these students attend charter schools, an increase of 14 percentage points from the previous year.

October 14, 2010
BESE’s RSD committee holds a public hearing in New Orleans on State Superintendent Pastorek and RSD Superintendent Vallas’s proposal for a process to return RSD schools to local control. Hundreds of parents, teachers, students, legislators, and community members crowded the auditorium to address the board members. BESE also collects comments on its website.

December 9, 2010
BESE adopts a revised policy for RSD schools in New Orleans to return to local control. All RSD schools in New Orleans will initially remain in the RSD, subject to the new policy. Schools meeting performance benchmarks will be eligible to choose to stay in the RSD or return to local control beginning in the 2012-13 school year. Failing schools will remain in the RSD, which must present an improvement plan for each school or else allow charter and local districts to apply to run the schools.

2011

January 4, 2011
The RSD holds the first of five public meetings seeking public input on the draft school building assignment plan released in August. RSD officials say they will release a final assignment plan after all the meetings, and will hold another set of meetings in April to discuss revisions to the School Facilities Master Plan.

February 22, 2011
RSD Superintendent Vallas announces that he plans to leave his position at the end of the school year. State Superintendent Pastorek says he will likely select a successor before April 25, the start of the 2011 regular Louisiana state legislative session.

March 23, 2011
BESE meets in New Orleans to discuss issues related to the RSD, including a proposal to allow charter schools to establish neighborhood zones. State Superintendent Pastorek introduces a draft vision statement for the RSD.

2011 (contd)
April 6, 2011
State Superintendent Pastorek announces that John White, New York City Department of Education’s deputy chancellor, will replace Vallas as RSD Superintendent.

May 10, 2011
State Superintendent Pastorek announces his resignation, effective May 13. Deputy Superintendent Ollie Tyler will lead the department until BESE hires a replacement.

May 13, 2011
RSD Superintendent White launches a 100-day planning process to develop a set of priorities for the district around the principles of excellence, equity, and community. Four task forces focused on parents, students, educators, and the community will meet and gather input during the 100 days.

May 24, 2011
For the fourth consecutive year, gains in the percentage of students in the RSD performing at grade level on the state’s high-stakes standardized tests outpaced state gains.

May 30, 2011
RSD and OPSB leaders release proposed amendments to the School Facilities Master Plan. Eight public meetings are scheduled to review the revisions.

June 14, 2011
RSD opens Parent-Family Resource Centers at four locations across the city to provide parents and students with resources for information on schools and services.

June 18, 2011
Superintendent White restructures the RSD central office, laying off 70 employees and splitting the office into five divisions: portfolio management, operations, services for charter schools, achievement, and community and policy.

July 26, 2011
The minimum SPS for Academically Unacceptable status increases from 60 to 65, meaning 23 of the 69 RSD schools are failing for the 2010-11 school year.

August 3, 2011
BESE votes to revoke the charter contract of a Type 5 charter school following allegations of misconduct – the first time BESE has used this power. Acting State Superintendent Tyler presents a proposal to increase the RSD’s oversight role for Type 5 charter schools.

August 7, 2011
In response to community feedback, the RSD and OPSB agree to have a committee of experts review and revise the proposed amendments to the School Facilities Master Plan.

August 9, 2011
The RSD begins the school year with 16 direct-run schools and 49 charter schools.

August 15, 2011
The RSD launches a series of public meetings at low-performing direct-run schools to discuss turnaround options with the intent to have a list of schools that will be converted to charters by the end of October.

September 6, 2011
At the conclusion of the 100-day period, the RSD releases a three-year strategic plan. The plan presents the RSD’s commitment to get every public school student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or attain a professional career and is based on the work of four task forces.

October 13, 2011
The revisions to the proposed amendments to the School Facilities Master Plan are presented to the public at a meeting of the Orleans Parish School Board.
The Current State of the Orleans Parish School Board

Student Achievement

After the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) gave the Recovery School District (RSD) control over the majority of public schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) was left with only a small number of high-performing schools, many of which had selective admissions policies. During the 2011–12 school year, the OPSB operated six direct-run schools and oversaw 11 charter schools, enrolling just over 10,000 students, down from about 65,000 in 2004. These schools, retained by the OPSB due to their high-performing nature, have generally continued to have high levels of achievement, and report significant gains, on the state’s standardized tests: the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP), iLEAP, and the Graduation Exit Exam (GEE). The percentage of all tests passed increased by 16 percentage points between 2006-07 and 2010–11, from 66 percent to 82 percent. The OPSB has also seen gains in its District Performance Score (DPS), an index that takes into account test passage rates, drop-out rates and attendance for both its charter and direct-run schools. The OPSB’s DPS increased 21.9 points from 96.1 in 2007-08 to 118.0 in 2010–11.

Despite a record of high performance for its schools, in December 2010 the board revoked the charter of one underperforming school, electing to keep it open and operate it directly. As of 2011, OPSB is no longer considered a “District Academically in Crisis” by the LDE and can now open new direct-run schools and grant charters to new schools. In Fall 2011, the OPSB was considering eight applications for new charter schools.

Operations and Finances

Due to the decreased number of schools it controls, the OPSB has drastically reduced the size of its central office operations since 2005. As of the 2010–11 school year, there are approximately 60 central office positions, down from about 1,300 before Hurricane Katrina. While this may be considered somewhat large for a district of its size, the OPSB oversees and provides services to 11 charter schools and remains the taxing and bonding authority for all schools in New Orleans, giving it additional responsibilities outside those of most districts. In its role as the taxing and bonding authority, the OPSB levies and collects local property and sales taxes and distributes them to its schools as well as RSD direct-run and charter schools on a per-pupil basis.

The OPSB’s annual expenditures have decreased from about $500 million in fiscal year 2005 to $150 million in fiscal year 2010 for both its direct-run and charter schools. While the district was close to bankruptcy in 2005 and was taken over by a financial turn-around team at the behest of the state, the OPSB’s financial situation has since improved. The district now operates with significant reserves and has received clean audits since 2006.
Prior to Hurricane Katrina, nearly all of the public schools in New Orleans were controlled by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the locally elected school board. In the aftermath of the storm, the state of Louisiana assumed control of the vast majority of schools previously operated by the OPSB, using the mechanism of the Recovery School District (RSD) to operate schools directly and open a large number of charter schools. The governance of public schools is currently divided between the OPSB, the RSD, and a number of charter school operators.

**Public School Governance in New Orleans**

*2011-12 School Year  Total: 87 Schools*

- **Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) & Louisiana Department of Education**
  - State Superintendent: Paul Pastorek
  - Authorized Charters: 54 Schools
  - 5 Type 2 Charters
  - 6 OPSB-run Schools
  - 11 OPSB Charters

- **Recovery School District**
  - Superintendent: John White
  - 16 Schools
  - 16 RSD-run Schools

- **Orleans Parish School Board**
  - Superintendent: Darryl Kilbert
  - 17 Schools
  - 49 Type 5 RSD Charters


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