



## Case Studies of School Choice and Open Enrollment in Four Cities

While New Orleans is at the vanguard of a number of public education innovations, it was not the first public school system to put into place an open enrollment policy. School districts in Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, among others, have instituted district-wide open enrollment systems, mandatory and/or voluntary, for elementary and/or high school grades. The following case studies review the open enrollment policies and systems in New Orleans, Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, examining how the systems operate and the impact they have on students and families.

New Orleans' policy of open enrollment for public schools was a necessity as the city rebuilt itself after Hurricane Katrina. Because of the patchwork nature of both the flood damage and the return of residents to their neighborhoods, attendance zones were eliminated. The system of citywide open enrollment continues to exist today. Orleans Parish students can apply to attend any public school, regardless of where in New Orleans the students live.

The effectiveness and efficiency of open enrollment that defines school choice in New Orleans is complicated by the multi-district governing model that exists. Public school governance in New Orleans includes the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), and over 40 different charter school operators. In this decentralized system, no single entity is responsible for managing the enrollment process, assigning students to schools, managing lotteries and waitlists, or providing information to parents. As a result, there is a lack of transparency, equitable access, and oversight.

The effectiveness of open enrollment in New Orleans should be assessed and adjusted on the basis of equity for students and accountability for schools. National

education policy think tank Education Sector writes about New Orleans' enrollment system:

...schools are trusted to recruit and enroll students independently, while parents are left to navigate the choice process alone, circumstances that increase the likelihood of only the most active and knowledgeable parents getting their child placed in one of their top choice schools. Such conditions resemble Boston and New York before they changed their choice matching systems. Importantly, the replication of the New York and Boston choice models in other cities would strengthen public education's relationship with a constituency that gets short shrift in policy debates – parents.<sup>i</sup>

In each open enrollment system examined, it is apparent that parents, students, and school counselors need support in navigating a complex system. Additionally, even sophisticated systems of matching students with schools leave some students without their preferred assignment. In Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, between 10 to 28 percent of students each year are not assigned to one of their top choice schools. Finally, the existence of neighborhood schools can impact the extent to which parents and students exercise their choice to go elsewhere. In San Diego where open enrollment program is voluntary, students are assigned to a neighborhood school unless they opt-in to a choice program. A 2006 study found that about 28 percent of students attended a choice school, the majority of whom were black, Asian, or Hispanic.

As stakeholders in New Orleans discuss modifications to the open enrollment policies currently in place, including centralizing an enrollment process, it is important to examine and learn from the successes and failures of the districts that have already instituted these systems. These case studies highlight some important lessons for education stakeholders in New Orleans to consider.



## School Choice and Open Enrollment: New Orleans, Louisiana

The public school system in New Orleans changed dramatically following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Today public schools in New Orleans are governed by a complicated multi-district model. In the 2010-11 school year, the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) had jurisdiction over 16 schools: five direct-run and 11 charter schools. The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) took over the majority of schools in the city after Katrina and placed them under the jurisdiction of the Recovery School District (RSD). In 2010-11, the RSD oversaw 69 schools: 23 direct-run and 46 charter schools. In addition, there were three charter schools authorized by and under the jurisdiction of BESE. During the 2010-11 school year public schools in New Orleans enrolled 39,877 students; 71 percent of students were enrolled in a charter school.

Following Katrina, given the nature of both the flood damage and the sporadic return of residents to their neighborhoods following the storm, public schools in New Orleans abolished their attendance zones, creating a system of citywide school choice. In addition, the majority of schools opened as charter schools. Because Louisiana's charter law explicitly states that students cannot be required by their local school district or the state to enroll in a charter school, with few exceptions,<sup>ii</sup> charter schools are schools of choice. As a result, all public schools, both charter and direct-run, became citywide access schools.

### Public Schools in New Orleans, 2010-11

K-12 Enrollment = 39,877  
Number of Schools = 88  
    District-run = 28  
    Charter Schools = 60  
Students in charter schools = 71%  
Student Demographics  
    White = 6%  
    African American = 89%  
    Hispanic = 3%  
    Asian = 2%  
    Other = 1%  
    Low SES = 84%

*Source: Louisiana Department of Education*

### School Choice and Open Enrollment

All public schools in New Orleans are citywide access schools today. Every RSD public school, charter or direct-run, can be attended by any Orleans Parish student, regardless of where in New Orleans they live, provided the school has capacity. Some OPSB direct-run schools and OPSB charter schools have additional admission requirements, but they are also available to qualifying students on a citywide basis. BESE charters can enroll students from anywhere in the state and can also have admissions requirements.

### The Application Process

The public school application process in New Orleans varies by school and school type. Although state laws and BESE policies guide the process under New Orleans' system of citywide choice, much is also left up to school or district discretion. RSD charter schools are required by BESE policy to comply with any unified application period set by the RSD, as approved by BESE. All RSD direct-run and charter schools, which include the majority (69 of 88 in 2010-11) of public schools in New Orleans, share the same application period.

Prior to October 2011, BESE policy required all other charter schools (those not under the RSD) to establish their own designated student application period between one and three months long, beginning no sooner than January 1<sup>st</sup>. In October 2011, BESE approved changes to policies for charter school recruitment and enrollment. The amended policy strikes the language requiring the application period to begin no sooner than January 1<sup>st</sup>.

According to the RSD's website, applications to RSD direct-run and charter schools for the 2011-12 school year were due April 11, 2011. Applications to the five OPSB direct-run schools were due December 17, 2010. The 11 OPSB charter schools each established their own deadlines which ranged from December to April. It is unclear why some OPSB charter school application deadlines were before the January 1<sup>st</sup> deadline, as stipulated by BESE policy during that school year.

All RSD charter and direct-run schools and OPSB direct-run schools have, since February 2008, opted to use a common application, though there is no law or

policy that requires it. Though many schools have chosen to use this common application, some schools require additional materials. OPSB charter schools, many of which are high-performing schools with selective admissions policies, use their own applications.

Prior to the October 2011 BESE policy revisions, parents were required to submit a separate application for each RSD school, direct-run and charter, and each OPSB charter school. A single application in which parents could check boxes to apply to multiple schools was available for OPSB direct-run schools only. Parents submitted completed applications to the appropriate district central office (OPSB or RSD) or directly to the individual schools during the times specified.

The October 2011 revisions to BESE policy require all RSD direct-run and charter schools to participate in a unified enrollment system established by the RSD. The new policy also permits other schools located in Orleans Parish to participate in the unified enrollment system upon approval of their governing boards: OPSB for direct-run schools and the charter board for charter schools. The new unified enrollment system will require parents to submit one application for all schools participating in the system; for the first time, parents will select and rank schools by order of preference.<sup>iii</sup>

### **The Student Assignment Process**

Until the implementation of the new centralized system for the 2011-12 school year, student assignment took place at the individual school level and the school districts (OPSB and RSD) were not directly involved in the process. Individual schools were responsible for offering admission to students from their pool of applicants. Schools waited until the end of the application period to offer admission to students. All schools were required to admit every student that met admissions requirements so long as there was sufficient capacity.

All children who are residents of New Orleans are guaranteed a place in a public school in the city, and charter schools in particular are required to enroll all eligible applicants unless the total number exceeds the capacity of a program, class, grade level, or school. Any student who submits an application on time, meets residency and admissions requirements is eligible to enroll in a charter school. Selective

residency and admissions requirements are only permissible at OPSB and BESE charter schools, which make up less than 20 percent of all public schools in New Orleans.

### **Lotteries and Waitlists**

All public schools in New Orleans, regardless of type or district, must have a process in place should the total number of applicants exceed the school's capacity for that program, class, or grade level. Capacity at each school is determined by the school board or charter authorizer (either the OPSB or BESE), and charter law specifies that charter schools cannot enroll more than 120 percent of the total number of students approved in their charter.

BESE policy on charter school enrollment specifies guidelines for the enrollment, lottery, and waitlist process. The October 2011 policy changes make these guidelines applicable only to charter schools that are not participating in the RSD's unified enrollment system in New Orleans. The RSD will be responsible for determining student assignments under the new system.

OPSB and BESE charter schools that choose not to participate in the RSD's new unified enrollment system are subject to BESE policy regarding the enrollment, lottery, and waitlist process. The policy stipulates that if a charter school receives fewer eligible applicants than maximum capacity, it should admit all students and may then continue to accept applications and admit eligible students in the order in which the applications are received until maximum capacity is reached. If the number of eligible applicants exceeds the capacity of a program, a grade level, or the school, applicants must be admitted based on an admissions lottery from among the total number of eligible applicants. The lottery will select students with the intention that the school will reach its maximum capacity, and then to determine the order of the waitlist.

Applicants must be placed on the waitlist in the order in which they were selected in the charter school's lottery or in the order in which they applied if the application was submitted following the school's application deadline. When there is an opening, selection must begin at the top of the waitlist. The waitlist must be maintained for the entire school year, and anyone who is admitted to the school must be

from the waitlist until all students from the waitlist have been offered the chance to enroll.

According to the BESE policy as amended in October 2011, direct-run and charter schools that participate in the RSD's unified enrollment system are subject to the enrollment policies and procedures established by the RSD. The RSD may conduct one or more central lotteries to enroll students at participating schools, and may enroll students requesting transfers or entering the public school system at any time. Additionally, the RSD will work with the schools to determine the number of students assigned to each grade level.

Charter schools are permitted by BESE policy to create a weighted lottery in order to ensure they are serving at-risk students. Additionally, certain students may be exempt from a lottery:

- Students already enrolled are exempt from the lottery and maintain enrollment following the charter school's application period.
- Siblings of current students are exempt from the lottery and are automatically enrolled following the charter school's application period.
- When a district-run school converts to a charter school, students who want to stay in the newly converted charter school are exempt from the lottery and will be automatically admitted following the charter school's application period.
- When an RSD charter school opens in a building formerly occupied by a pre-existing public school, students who attended school in that building may be exempt from a lottery and may be automatically admitted following the charter school's application period, if authorized in the school's charter.

Charter schools outline their specific enrollment and admissions procedures, including how they will communicate with parents and potential applicants, in their charter applications. The RSD and the OPSB each set a timeline by which schools will notify parents of their students' acceptance or non-acceptance, as well as a deadline by which parents must accept admission. During the application period for the 201-12 school year, RSD charter and direct-run schools were permitted to begin contacting parents on April 30, 2011 and were required to notify all parents of acceptance or non-acceptance by May 6, 2011. Parents were then asked to choose a school and to enroll by May 30, 2011. There has not been a

formal mechanism for parents to notify schools that were not chosen. OPSB direct-run schools issued letters of acceptance or non-acceptance by April 15, 2011 and parents were required to accept admission by April 21, 2011. OPSB charter schools each set their own timeline.

### Other Considerations

No public school can exclude students based on race, religion, gender, ethnicity, national origin, intelligence level as ascertained by an intelligence quotient examination, or identification as a child with an exceptionality. However, pursuant to Louisiana's charter law, OPSB and BESE charter schools may have admission requirements consistent with the school's role, scope, and mission. Examples of admissions requirements at these schools include: prior grades (GPA); attendance; standardized test scores; grade-level readiness assessments; foreign language proficiency; artistic talent; parental involvement; student's home address.<sup>iv</sup> RSD charter schools cannot have selective admissions requirements.

Additionally, Louisiana's charter law specifies different requirements for the different types of charter schools regarding geographic attendance boundaries. All OPSB and RSD charter schools can enroll students from anywhere in the district, while BESE charter schools can enroll students from anywhere in the state. Both OPSB and BESE charter schools can set more narrow attendance boundaries as well, if allowed for in the school's charter.

RSD charter schools have not had geographic attendance zones through the 2011-12 school year. Legislation and subsequent BESE policy approved in April 2011 allowed RSD charter schools to preference students from a neighborhood zone; no school requested to do so by the deadline.<sup>v</sup> At that time, BESE stated that charter schools would be ineligible to receive federal start-up funding in the first three years of operations if they implemented geographic boundaries.<sup>vi</sup> According to the October 2011 revisions to BESE policy, the RSD may grant or assign preference in its unified enrollment process to students residing in geographic boundaries immediately surrounding each school, as determined by the RSD.

Finally, BESE policy and Louisiana's charter law provide guidelines for an at-risk student population

that must be maintained at charter schools depending on their type and whether or not they are conversions. Except for RSD charter schools, charter schools must maintain an at-risk student population percentage that is equal to the percentage of students eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program in: (a) the district in which the school is located; (b) the average of districts from which students served by the charter school reside (BESE charter schools only); or (c) the school prior to conversion (BESE and OPSB conversions).

### **Impact of School Choice and Open Enrollment**

While the citywide choice system has increased the number of options for parents and students, it has also created a more complex application and enrollment process. Public schools in New Orleans lack a unified application or enrollment process. In addition, there is no single entity or organization with the power to ensure all schools are following their stated enrollment policies, state law, or BESE policies fairly. The existence of multiple school operators and governing bodies with varying enrollment and admissions processes, some more stringent or complicated than others, can make the process of selecting and enrolling in a school difficult.

Furthermore, there is no formal official entity tasked with disseminating information on all public schools to parents, which has made it particularly difficult for parents of students with special needs to find appropriate services within the public school system.

Citywide access to all schools and the absence of neighborhood catchment zones has financial implications for schools as well. One of the most significant is the cost of transportation, with bus routes often spanning the boundaries of the entire city. A recent study found that only 13 percent of students attended school in their neighborhood in the 2010-11 school year.<sup>vii</sup> Busing students from areas across the city has led to a vast increase in the cost of transportation overall, from less than four percent before Hurricane Katrina to approximately seven percent of expenditures in recent years. Indeed, some schools reported spending as much as 13 percent of total expenditures on transportation in 2009-10.

The problems with the current mix of policies and processes have been recognized by the RSD and the OPSB. The RSD is in the process of developing a unified system for application and enrollment for all of its direct-run and charter schools. Revisions approved in October 2011 to BESE policy allow the RSD to create a unified enrollment system and for participating schools to be required to grant preference in enrollment based on neighborhood geographic boundaries. Striking the right balance between citywide choice and neighborhood preferences could be logistically difficult, but a good balance could better optimize parent and student preferences while saving schools money on transportation.