



# K-12 Public Education through the Public's Eye: A Survey of the New Orleans Community

November 2010

## Introduction

Public education in New Orleans has undergone a number of major reforms since Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding devastated the city in 2005. Before the storm, nearly all elementary and secondary public schools were operated and governed by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). In November 2005, the state Legislature voted to take over most public schools in New Orleans and place them under the control of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Both the RSD and the OPSB have converted many of their formerly district-operated schools into charter schools, as well as opened new charter schools. As a result, the governance of public schools in New Orleans is now split between two districts with more than 30 different nonprofit organizations operating charter schools.

Today, the question of who will govern New Orleans' public schools in the future remains uncertain. While the Recovery School District's takeover of failing schools was to last for at least five years, there was no plan for governance outlined beyond that time. Many of the schools taken over after Katrina are now nearing that five-year mark. In December 2010, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) will vote on a plan proposed by State Superintendent Paul Pastorek that would allow schools meeting certain academic performance standards to decide for themselves whether or not to return to governance under the Orleans Parish School Board or remain overseen by the state under the aegis of the Recovery School District.

Few communities have the opportunity to think through the organization of their public education system in the way that the city of New Orleans has had and will continue to have over the next few years. For this reason, Tulane University's Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives

commissioned its second annual public opinion poll to assess the community's perception about the performance of public schools and the future direction of public education governance in New Orleans. Giving a voice to citizens is crucial to creating and sustaining positive change at this critical juncture in our city's future.

## Methodology

This public opinion poll is the second annual survey commissioned by the Cowen Institute to gauge public opinion about K-12 public education in New Orleans. The survey was conducted by phone between the dates of October 18-21, 2010 by Market Research Insight on behalf of the Cowen Institute. The methodology was identical to that used in the opinion poll that was conducted in November 2009, and the majority of questions were the same as those asked in 2009. In addition, three questions relating to governance were added to the questionnaire this year.

The sample population consisted of 500 randomly selected registered voters in Orleans Parish. The population of registered voters is somewhat different from the population of adult residents in New Orleans as a whole; registered voters tend to be slightly older and have slightly higher educational attainment on average. However, voter lists provide the most comprehensive sample of residents that is readily available for surveying. Our survey sample is representative of the racial, ethnic, and income distribution of the city. The confidence interval of +/- five percent indicates that the results reflect the opinions of New Orleans' registered voters as a whole.

### 2010 Survey Respondents:

- Sample Size: 500
- 60% African American; 40% Other Races
- 45% Male; 55% Female

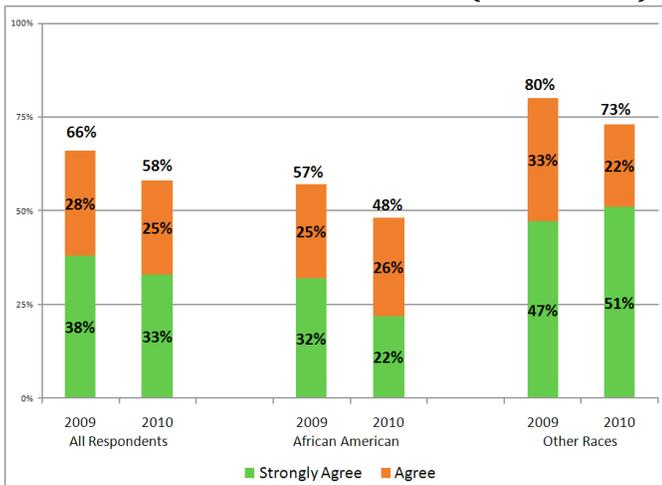


## Results

### How Are Public Schools Doing?

In the past five years, public education in New Orleans has undergone a number of reforms, beginning with the state takeover of the majority of the city's public schools. According to our survey, fewer people support the State Legislature's decision to take over most of the city's public schools than those surveyed in 2009. This year, 58 percent of voters agree or strongly agree with the state's decision, down from 66 percent in last year's poll. There was a large difference in opinion by race, with just under half of African American voters responding that they agree or strongly agree with the state's decision, compared to nearly three-quarters of other races. The following graph illustrates the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the state's decision to take over most public schools in New Orleans.

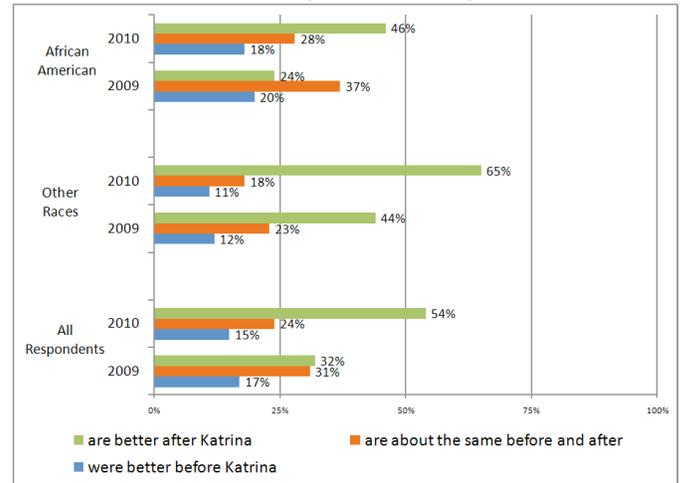
**Percentage Who Agree or Strongly Agree with the State's Decision to Take Over Most Public Schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (2009 & 2010)**



Voters were also asked whether or not they believed that public schools in New Orleans are better since Hurricane Katrina, were better before Katrina, or are about the same before and after. More than half of all voters in the 2010 poll responded that schools are better since Katrina, up from only a third of voters in 2009. These numbers do vary, however, according to race. While fewer African Americans, slightly under half, responded that schools are better since the hurricane, this was nearly double the 24 percent that gave the same answer in last year's poll. Additionally, the belief that schools are better increased from 44 percent to 65 percent among non-

African Americans. The graph below shows the percentage of respondents in 2009 and 2010 who believe public schools in New Orleans are better since Katrina (green bar), are about the same before and after (orange bar) or were better before Katrina (blue bar). There was a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who feel public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina.

**Percentage Who Feel Public Schools in New Orleans are Better, Same, or Worse Than Before Hurricane Katrina (2009 & 2010)**



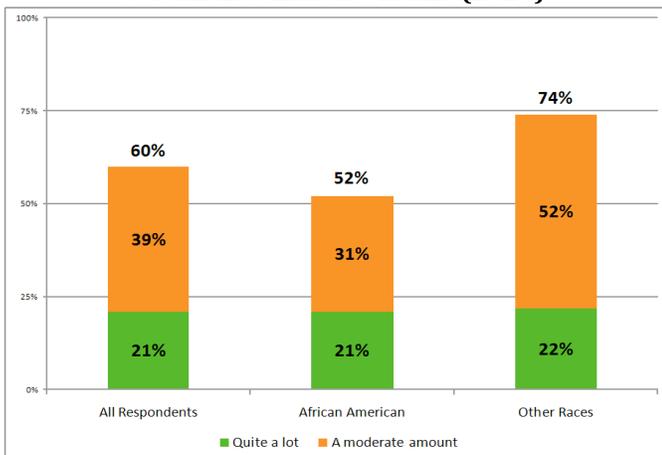
Although the Cowen Institute's 2009 poll found only 32 percent of surveyed voters believed that public schools were better after Katrina, these results differed significantly from a similar question asked in a 2009 poll conducted by another organization. In 2009, Democracy Corps conducted a poll asking voters whether they thought public schools in New Orleans were getting better or worse since Katrina. In their poll, half of those surveyed said they believed schools were getting better and 17 percent said they believed schools were getting worse. While the Cowen Institute poll asked whether or not schools are currently better or worse than they were before Katrina, the Democracy' Corps asked whether or not schools were *getting* better or worse. To clarify, we added a question to our 2010 poll that asked whether or not voters feel schools are improving. When asked, "Would you say that public schools in New Orleans are improving, getting worse, or neither improving nor getting worse?" more than half of respondents (52 percent among African Americans and 67 percent among all other races) answered that schools are improving. Only 10 percent of all respondents felt that schools are getting worse.

## Future Governance of Public Education in New Orleans

We are at a critical crossroads in determining the future of public schools in New Orleans. Due to the state takeover of low-performing schools in 2005 and the initial five-year term of this takeover, we are approaching the end of that time frame for a number of schools that were opened during the 2005-06 school year. In response to this deadline, BESE will vote in December 2010 on a plan for the future governance of New Orleans public schools that will impact the city for years to come.

With this decision coming soon, the poll asked a number of questions about system-level governance. Because voters' opinions often depend on the amount and type of information they have access to, the poll also asked a question about the amount of information the public felt they had about governance. When asked how much information they had on public school governance in New Orleans, 60 percent of voters answered that they feel they have "quite a lot" or a "moderate amount" of information. This percentage fell to about half among African American respondents and rose to nearly three quarters among all other races. The next graph shows the percentage of respondents who said they feel they have "quite a lot" or "a moderate amount" of information about public school governance in New Orleans.

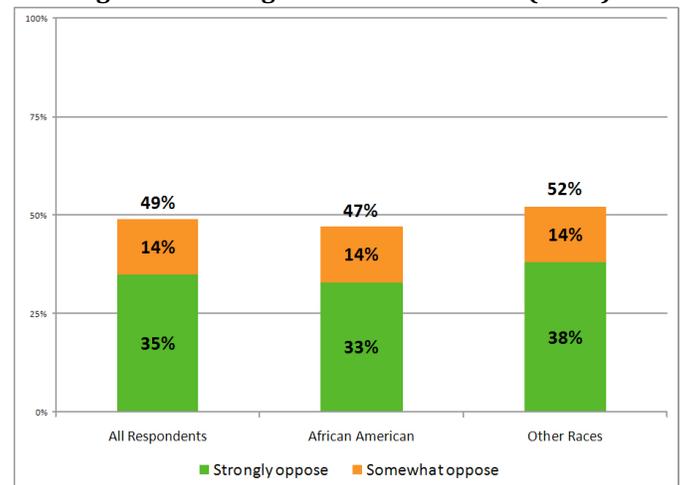
**Percentage Who Believe They Have Quite a Lot or a Moderate Amount of Information about Public School Governance in New Orleans (2010)**



New questions were asked this year that related directly to Superintendent Paul Pastorek's proposed plan for governance. The Superintendent's

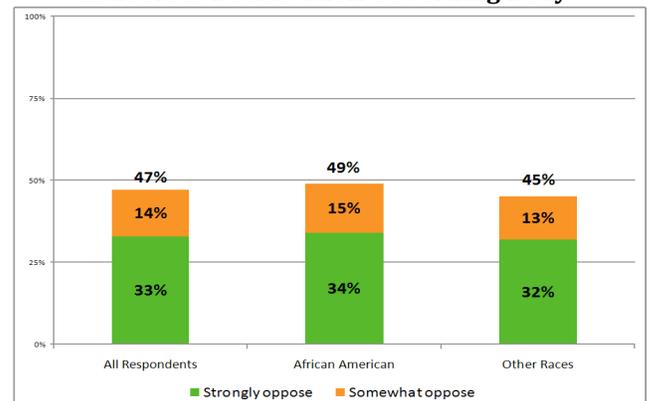
recommendation would allow schools currently under the RSD that meet the prescribed academic performance threshold after five years to choose to stay under the RSD's jurisdiction or to be transferred back to the OPSB. When asked whether low-performing schools should remain in the RSD while high-performing schools return to the OPSB, half of voters expressed opposition. Slightly less than one-third of those surveyed favor or strongly favor keeping the low-performing schools in the RSD and returning high-performing schools to the OPSB. For this question, there was little variation in responses by race. The graph below illustrates the responses.

**Percentage Who Oppose or Strongly Oppose Returning High-Performing Schools to the OPSB (2010)**



The Superintendent's proposed plan allows schools to choose their governing body. Nearly half of all voters surveyed are opposed or strongly opposed to allowing individual schools to decide whether they would be overseen by the RSD or the OPSB.

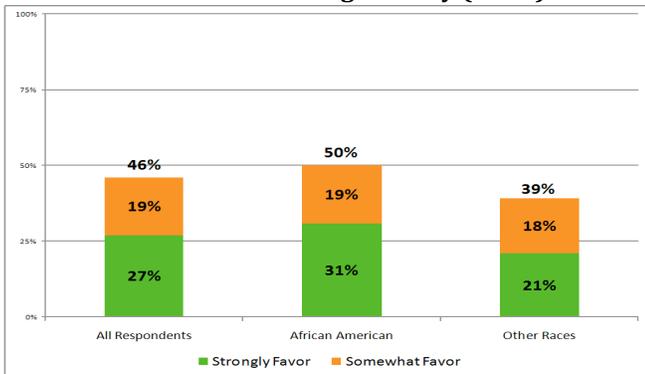
**Percentage Who Oppose or Strongly Oppose Allowing Schools to Decide Their Governing Body**



However, the Superintendent’s plan does not represent the totality of options for the future governance of public schools in the city. The Cowen Institute’s 2010 survey asked voters whether or not they favored or opposed a series of potential options for governance that included not only those suggested by Superintendent Pastorek but also other options that were asked about in last year’s poll and continue to remain viable options for education leaders and citizens to consider.

In one question, voters were asked whether or not they support putting all schools under a single governing entity. Nearly half of those asked favor or strongly favor doing so, while about one-third oppose or strongly oppose it. About 20 percent were uncertain about whether or not they favor or oppose either option.

**Percentage Who Favor or Strongly Favor Putting All Schools Under a Single Entity (2010)**



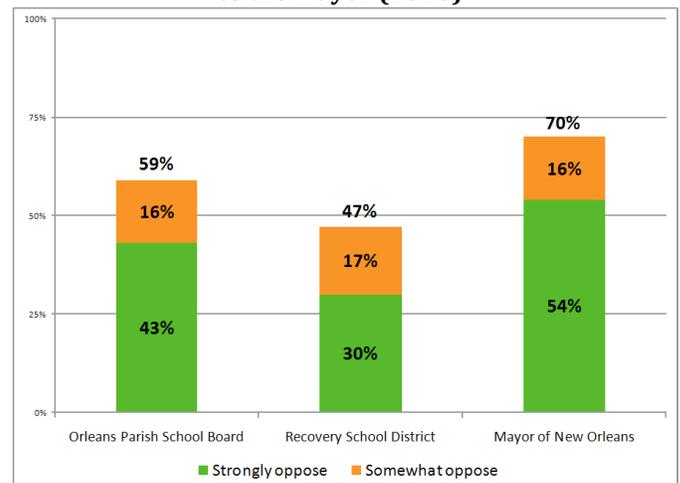
Questions were then asked about specific entities that might control schools and how the members of some of those entities might be selected. When voters were asked their opinion about giving control of all schools back to the OPSB, 59 percent oppose or strongly oppose this option, a slight increase from 2009 (55 percent). Response to this question varied somewhat according to race: while about half of African Americans oppose or strongly oppose giving control back to the OPSB, 69 percent of all other races oppose or strongly oppose this option. Similarly, more African American voters (36 percent) favor or strongly favor giving all schools back to the OPSB as compared to 16 percent of all other voters, a decline from 25 percent of all other voters in 2009.

While the majority of voters (58 percent) still agree or strongly agree that the state made the right

decision in taking over most schools in the aftermath of Katrina and giving control of them to the RSD, support for giving the RSD control of all schools going forward has declined somewhat since last year. Last year, there was a nearly even divide of voters opposing (39 percent) and supporting (40 percent) this option. The 2010 poll found that 47 percent of voters now oppose or strongly oppose giving the RSD control of all schools and only one-third support or strongly support this option.

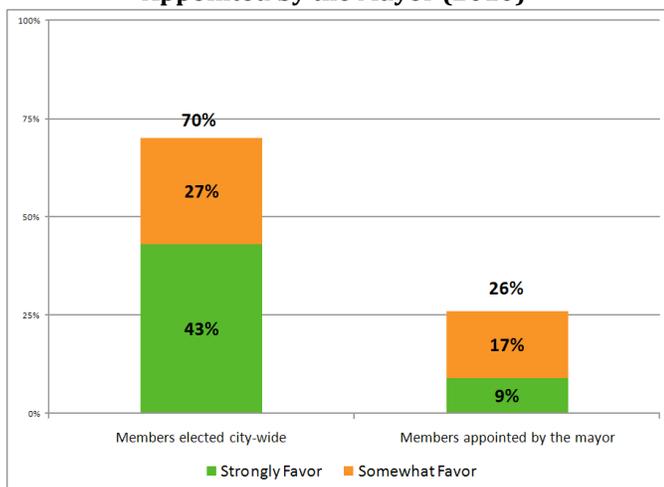
As in the 2009 poll, there was strong opposition to mayoral involvement in the governance of public schools in the form of mayoral control over all schools. However, this opposition seemed tempered somewhat with the 2010 poll. 70 percent of voters oppose or strongly oppose giving the mayor control of all schools, compared to 83 percent in 2009. This change is likely due to the election of Mayor Mitch Landrieu, who was elected by a landslide, garnering the majority of votes among whites and African Americans. Yet despite his popularity, voters do not seem to want schools to be controlled by City Hall. Interestingly, 22 percent of African Americans support giving the mayor control of all schools—more than double the nine percent noted in the 2009 poll. The following graph illustrates the percentage of all voters surveyed who oppose or strongly oppose giving the control of all public schools in New Orleans to OPSB, RSD, or the mayor.

**Percentage Who Oppose or Strongly Oppose Giving Control of All Schools Back to the OPSB, to the RSD, or to the Mayor (2010)**



One governance option garnered widespread favor in both the 2009 and 2010 polls. The creation of a new school board to be elected citywide was favored or strongly favored by 70 percent of voters in this year's poll. Support was even stronger among African Americans at 78 percent. However, the creation of a new school board whose members are appointed by the mayor continued to be unpopular. While opposition to a mayorally appointed board also fell from 80 percent in 2009, it remained high at 62 percent in the 2010 poll.

**Percentage Who Favor or Strongly Favor Creating a New School Board Whose Members Are Elected or Appointed by the Mayor (2010)**



## Conclusion

The Cowen Institute's second annual opinion poll provides some clarity about voter sentiment on the performance of public schools in New Orleans and on options for the future governance of the city's public education system. Voters generally support the state's decision to take over schools in 2005, though that percentage has fallen slightly since last year. There is much greater agreement that schools are better now than they were before Hurricane Katrina. In the 2009 poll, only 32 percent of voters surveyed felt that schools had improved since Katrina. That number rose to 54 percent this year, and the number of African American voters agreeing that schools are better nearly doubled. We also found that the voters surveyed were optimistic about the future of public schools in New Orleans: 58 percent of voters surveyed believe that public schools are improving. These positive feelings about schools and their trajectory are encouraging.

In addition, the 2010 poll provides insight into the public's opinion regarding the future of public school governance. Voters' opinions on governance are based on the amount and type of information they have access to, and 60 percent of voters feel that they have "a lot" or "a moderate amount" of information. However, a large number of those surveyed still felt they lacked adequate information on the issues surrounding school governance.

The poll asked questions about governance that gauged respondents' opinions on State Superintendent Paul Pastorek's proposed governance plan, which allows for schools to choose which governing body they want to oversee them once they reach a certain performance threshold after five years of operation. Nearly half of respondents are opposed to allowing schools to individually decide who should govern them. Additionally, half of respondents are opposed to keeping low-performing schools under the RSD and moving high-performing schools to the OPSB. Another 20 percent of respondents remain uncertain about the best option.

More generally related to governance, nearly half of voters support putting all schools under control of a single entity but about one-third oppose or strongly oppose this option. Voters are mostly opposed to giving schools back to the OPSB and while last year public opinion was split on giving all schools to the RSD, there was an increase in opposition to that option this year. Voters are overwhelmingly opposed to total mayoral control of schools, a sentiment seen last year as well. While this opposition has fallen slightly since the 2009 survey, with the election of Mitch Landrieu as mayor, it remains strong. Answers to these questions indicate a desire to regain local control of schools, though perhaps under a new or restructured entity. Voters did express strong support for a new board that is elected citywide, as opposed to by district, to govern schools.

Answers to the questions specifically related to the State Superintendent's recommendation to BESE as well as many of the other potential governance options seem to indicate that there is little consensus on what might work best for schools and students. Confusion and uncertainty about the city's options for public education governance seems widespread.

As we undertake the process of putting into place a permanent governance structure, it is critical that the public be informed of their options and the advantages and disadvantages of each. It is also vital that public opinion continue to be collected and considered as state legislators, BESE, and Superintendent Pastorek make decisions regarding long-term governance of K-12 public schools in New Orleans.



The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action oriented think tank that informs and advances research-based policy, legislative, and programmatic solutions to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education in New Orleans and beyond.

### Applied Research at the Cowen Institute



We serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans—particularly in the areas of accountability, finance, facilities, and governance—by disseminating relevant data and research. This publication, and others released in the past, can be found at <http://education.tulane.edu>.

Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives  
Tulane University  
200 Broadway Street, Suite 108  
New Orleans, Louisiana 70118  
504-274-3690  
<http://education.tulane.edu>