



**THE STATE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS:  
THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Charter schools in New Orleans have been hailed as the silver lining to Hurricane Katrina. The state of Louisiana used the hurricane as an opportunity to rebuild the entire New Orleans public school system, and launched the nation's most extensive charter school experiment. This report evaluates how this experiment has fared in providing quality education to all students of the public school system regardless of race, socioeconomic class, or where they live in New Orleans metropolitan area.

The reorganization of the city's schools has created a separate but unequal tiered system of schools that steers a minority of students, including virtually all of the city's white students, into a set of selective, higher-performing schools and another group, including most of the city's students of color, into a group of lower-performing schools. The extremely rapid growth of charter schools has not improved this pattern.

Segregation of students in the city and the metropolitan area is a cause for concern. Racial and economic segregation undermine the life chances and educational opportunities of low income students and students of color. School choice does not by itself empower students of color to escape this, especially when choice leads them to racially segregated, high-poverty schools.

The report argues that in order to guarantee equal educational opportunities to all of the region's students, the school system should take a more balanced, regional approach, including a renewed commitment to the city's traditional public schools and enhanced choices for students in the form of regional magnet schools and new inter-district programs.

**FINDINGS FOR THE NEW ORLEANS METROPOLITAN AREA:**

**Public schools in the New Orleans metro continue to be racially and economically segregated despite the school reforms introduced post-Katrina.**

- In 2009, three out of five schools in the New Orleans metropolitan area were non-white segregated while only around a third of all schools were integrated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, non-white segregated schools are defined as schools where the share of blacks, Hispanics or other students of color exceeds 50 percent or as schools with varying combinations of black, Hispanic, and other students of color with a share of white students less than 30 percent. In predominantly white schools, the share of each non-white group is smaller than 10 percent. Any school that is not non-white segregated or predominantly white (white segregated) is considered integrated.

- Overall, suburban schools were far more integrated than the schools in the city: more than 40 percent of suburban schools were integrated, while only 10 percent of city schools were integrated.

**High racial segregation in city schools and modest but increasing levels of racial segregation in suburban schools means that most of the region’s students of color attend school in a segregated setting.**

- In 2009, 73 percent of all students of color in the region attended a non-white segregated school. In contrast, only 22 percent of white students in the region attended a white segregated school.
- Representing the overwhelming majority of students of color in the region, black students faced the highest levels of segregation both in the city and suburbs. In 2009, 78 percent of the black students in the New Orleans metro were still in segregated settings.
- In 2009, nearly half of Hispanic students and other students of color attended segregated schools.
- Even in the suburbs, nearly six out of ten students of color attended a non-white segregated suburban school.

**Racial segregation is highly correlated with income segregation in the New Orleans metro.**

- In 2009, 99 percent of the non-white segregated schools in the New Orleans metro met the standard definition for ‘high poverty’—with free and reduced-price lunch eligible student rates above 40 percent.
- In 2009, 84 percent of the non-white segregated schools in the metro had ‘very high poverty’—with free and reduced-price lunch eligible student rates above 75 percent. In contrast, only 23 percent of integrated schools in the metro had very high poverty.

**Students of color are especially hurt by the metro’s racial and economic segregation because they largely attend non-white segregated schools with high concentrations of poverty while white segregated schools tend to have low rates of poverty.**

- In 2009, the average poverty rate in non-white segregated schools (68 percent) was twice the poverty rate (34 percent) in predominantly white schools in the New Orleans metro.
- Overall, 93 percent of all students of color attended a high-poverty school in the region in contrast to 65 percent of all white students.
- In 2009, students of color in the New Orleans region were nearly 3.5 times more likely to attend very high poverty schools than white students: 65 percent of all students of color in the region attended a very high poverty school compared to 19 percent of white students.
- Black students were most likely to be in very high poverty schools among all students of color: in 2009, 69 percent of them attended school in very high poverty schools,

compared to 46 percent of the Hispanic, 41 percent of the Asian, 43 percent of the American Indian students in the region.

#### **FINDINGS FOR THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS:**

**Rebuilding of the public school system in post-Katrina New Orleans has produced a five “tiered” system of public schools in which *not* every student in the city receives the same quality education.**

- In the new system, public schools operate under five distinct governance structures that serve different student populations: Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) traditional public schools (which educate 7 percent of the city’s students); OPSB charter schools (20 percent); Recovery School District (RSD) traditional public schools (36 percent); RSD charter schools (34 percent); and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) charter schools (2 percent).
- Public schools in this tiered system do not compete on a level playing field because schools in each sector operate under different rules and regulations.

**The “tiered” system of public schools in the city of New Orleans sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools in the OPSB and BESE sectors, while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty schools in the RSD sector.**

- In 2009, 87 percent of all white students in the city attended an OPSB or BESE charter school, while only 18 percent of black students did so.
- In contrast, 75 percent of black students attended an RSD school (charter or traditional public) in 2009, compared to only 11 percent of white students.
- Although nearly all schools in the city were high poverty, OPSB and BESE charters showed the lowest shares of high-poverty schools—67 and 50 percent—in the city. In contrast, nearly all RSD schools were high-poverty schools.

**Racial and economic segregation hurt even the limited number of students of color who are in the OPSB and BESE sectors.**

- Students of color were much more likely to attend a high-poverty school than white students in these two sectors. For instance, in 2009, students of color in OPSB charter schools were nearly 12 times more likely to attend a high-poverty OPSB school than white students.

#### **PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE NEW ORLEANS METROPOLITAN AREA:**

**The “tiered” system of public schools in the metro creates a tiered performance hierarchy and sorts white students and a minority of students of color into higher performing schools while restricting the majority of low income students of color into lower performing schools.**

- School performance varies significantly across OPSB, RSD, BESE and suburban schools but not so much between charter and traditional schools.
- OPSB schools rank highest for the most part followed by BESE and suburban schools, with RSD schools lagging behind.

**School performance varies significantly across sectors because schools in each sector do not compete on a level playing field.**

- OPSB and BESE schools in the city provide some of the most advantageous educational settings in the region. However, they do so mostly by skimming the easiest-to-educate students through selective admission requirements that allow them to set explicit academic standards for incoming students. They also shape their student enrollments by using their enrollment practices, discipline and expulsion practices, transportation policies, location decisions, and marketing and recruitment efforts. These practices certainly contribute to the selective student bodies and superior performance of these schools.
- Suburban public schools—charters and non-charters—also provide good educational settings and outcomes. Suburban traditional schools are less likely to be segregated by race or income and test scores reflect this.
- RSD charter schools still skim the most motivated public students in the RSD sector despite lacking the selective admission requirements OPSB and BESE charters have. They do so by using their enrollment practices, discipline and expulsion practices, transportation policies, location decisions, and marketing and recruitment efforts. These practices almost certainly work to increase pass rates in RSD charters compared to their traditional counterparts.
- As a result of rules that put RSD traditional schools at a competitive disadvantage, schools in this sector are reduced to ‘schools of last resort.’ This sector continues to educate the hardest-to-educate students in racially segregated, high-poverty schools.

**School performance varies much less between charter and traditional schools in each sector.**

- OPSB and suburban charter schools do not outperform their traditional counterparts.
- RSD charter schools do outperform RSD traditional public schools but the margins are modest and are narrowing for fourth graders.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. Charter schools cannot be the only institution providing public education and choice in the city of New Orleans.**

The charter school sector in the city of New Orleans has been growing in a haphazard way in response to strong financial incentives and not because of their superior educational performance. The increasingly charterized public school system has seriously undermined equality of opportunity among public school students, sorting white students and a small

minority of students of color into better performing OPSB and BESE schools, while confining the majority of low-income students of color to the lower performing RSD sector.

There are also indications that the recent rapid growth in the charter sector cannot continue. Charter proponents in New Orleans acknowledge that the charter system is already saturated as the public school system now approaches its full capacity. The capacity of the charter system to serve public students in New Orleans is already strained and is likely to erode as the post-Katrina aid to the city of New Orleans declines.

Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that, in the long run, a fully charterized system is not sustainable. Recent studies raise serious questions about the ability of charter schools and charter management organizations to scale up as dramatically as their supporters might hope. In addition, the underlying characteristics of the charter system and experiences in other parts of the country imply that the accountability usually demanded of programs using tax money will eventually become a problem, either in the form of increasing administrative costs for the system or financial irregularities.

Despite these issues, the charter system in New Orleans is gearing up to grow even further. With the help of new legislation that facilitates the expansion of the charter sector, publicly funded charter schools are expected to outnumber traditional public schools by three-to-one by 2012. At this point, the continuing expansion of the charter sector is jeopardizing the very existence of the traditional public sector in the city. This type of predatory expansion runs counter to the promise of expanding school choice for New Orleans parents. When charter schools become the only option, rather than being one among many, choice options are narrowed for students.

In light of all these arguments, it is time to reevaluate the decision to rely exclusively on charter schools in providing education to public students in the city of New Orleans and to expand the portfolio of strategies used for restructuring the system in the aftermath of Katrina. This is an opportune time to slow down the planned expansion of the charter sector, take stock of where the public school system is, and reevaluate where the entire public school system needs to be.

## **2. Renew the system's commitment to the RSD traditional public sector.**

An improving traditional public school sector should remain as part of an expanded portfolio of choices available to the city's students. The current playing field is clearly not level. This report documents the rules and practices that put RSD traditional schools, which educate 36 percent of the city's students (the majority low-income students of color), at a competitive disadvantage. OPSB and BESE schools as well as RSD charters have the power to tailor their student populations in ways that RSD traditional schools cannot. Despite this, performance in RSD traditional schools is improving. But RSD traditional schools cannot continue to improve if they remain 'schools of last resort'. The district must be as committed to improving these schools as it is to the rapidly expanding charter sector. Traditional schools must be provided the resources needed to continue their improvement. For instance, making sure that RSD traditional schools have access to a sufficiently experienced teacher pool would be an important step in this direction.

## **3. Reinvest in magnet schools as an alternative school choice strategy.**

School choice does not necessarily have to undermine equality of opportunity in urban school districts. School choice could in fact reduce existing inequalities in access to high-quality

education if it is provided through choice strategies that promote racial and economic integration. Such strategies are also proven to be effective in reducing existing gaps between the performances of white students and students of color. It is not a coincidence that the most successful school sectors in the New Orleans metro area are also the most integrated ones.

Expansion of school choice through magnet schools is one such strategy. Originally, magnet schools were designed to use incentives rather than coercion to create desegregation in the public school system. This original intent empowered magnet schools with strong civil rights protections such as good parent information/outreach, explicit desegregation goals, free transportation, and in most cases, open admission processes. Many magnets were extremely popular and successful schools and served as effective tools for voluntary integration. In fact, many of the most successful schools in the city of New Orleans (schools that are currently in the OPSB sector) started as magnet schools and are still magnets. Over time, many magnets lost their original desegregation mechanisms for a number of reasons. If their desegregation mechanisms are restored, magnet schools can resume their role in providing successful educational outcomes, parental choice and integration simultaneously.

The presence of a large private school sector—with its nearly 18,500 students (over 10,000 white) — in the city of New Orleans represents an opportunity for magnet schools as much as it does for charter or traditional schools. High-quality, reputable magnet schools have worked to attract white students to urban public schools in many parts of the country. High-quality magnet schools have also succeeded in New Orleans in the past. They could certainly be an enticing option for many parents, white or black, who are now spending money on private schooling. By locating high-quality magnet schools near job centers in the city, the traditional public school system in the city of New Orleans could also make magnet schools an enticing option for many suburban parents who work in the city. By placing magnet schools in locations that are convenient to urban and suburban parents, the system could further enhance the viability of magnet schools, making them an additional instrument of school choice in the city of New Orleans.

#### **4. Make region-wide efforts to expand the choices available to students and parents.**

It is unrealistic to expect magnet, charter or traditional schools in the city to fully integrate the city's public schools. Students of color make up 95 percent and free and reduced-price lunch eligible students constitute 83 percent of the students in the New Orleans public school system. These demographics make it impossible to racially and economically integrate the city schools in isolation. However, over 10,000 white students in the city of New Orleans attend private schools and many of the 18,500 private school students in the city are likely to be middle-class—presenting an additional opportunity to further integrate the city's schools.

The city must also look outward toward the rest of the New Orleans metropolitan area if it wishes to truly integrate its schools. The regional data show that cooperative efforts between the city and its suburbs provide the potential for a much more integrated system. In 2009, there were three times as many students in suburban public schools as in the city system. The racial and income mix of the full regional school system clearly provides much more potential for integration efforts than the city alone. An effective regional system would also be likely to fare better in competition with the private system than the city alone. The important point is that, even as daunting as the raw numbers appear to be, there are realistic options available to integrate public schools in the city.

One approach is to actually combine operations with suburban areas. Large-scale, nearly region-wide school systems in Louisville, Kentucky and Raleigh, North Carolina provide good examples of this. In these areas, the city school districts consolidated with the surrounding districts into a single county-wide district.

Voluntary inter-district transfer programs that enable low-income students to transfer to low-poverty schools in suburban school districts can also be an important part of a metropolitan portfolio of school choice. Suburban schools in the New Orleans metropolitan area, which tend to be less racially segregated with lower poverty than their city counterparts, offer good educational outcomes and life opportunities to low-income students and students of color. An example of a voluntary inter-district program that promotes racial and economic integration in the public school system is already in place in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

Voluntary inter-district transfer programs involving high-quality suburban schools can also be a great complement to magnet schools in urban areas. The two choice options can work together to reduce racial and economic segregation in a region's public schools. An example comes from St. Louis Public Schools in Missouri—a public school district with a student body very similar to New Orleans'. In St. Louis, the district established a very successful voluntary inter-district program that promotes racial and economic integration in the public school system in response to a court order to desegregate its schools. The program provides for the voluntary transfer of city students into suburban districts and suburban students into magnet schools in the city. Around a quarter of the district's student body take advantage of the program.

The program has been very successful in terms of boosting graduation and college attendance rates among participating students. Students who participate in the program graduated at rates double those in the city schools they would have otherwise attended and 77 percent of the program participants attended two or four year colleges—significantly above the statewide average of 47 percent for students of color. When combined with magnet schools voluntary inter-district programs could not only reduce the racial and economic segregation of public school students at the regional level but also ameliorate the unacceptable opportunity gap that exists between white students and students of color in the New Orleans metropolitan area.