

A photograph of a woman with glasses and a young boy looking at a book together. The woman is on the left, wearing glasses and looking towards the right. The boy is on the right, wearing a checkered shirt and looking down at a book. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom setting.

Executive Summary

# The State of Public Education in New Orleans

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*A Report Prepared by The Boston Consulting Group for  
The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation  
Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives  
The New Orleans City Council Education Committee*

IN THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE KATRINA, a new “system of schools” has emerged. This new system, while struggling, has the potential to fundamentally transform public education in the city. If it can, New Orleans will be able to provide every public student in every school with the opportunity for a high-quality education.

## THE NEW MODEL

Before Hurricane Katrina displaced all 64,000 students and 7,500 public school employees in August 2005, New Orleans Public Schools ranked as one of the lowest-performing school districts in the country. The district faced significant financial problems and was on the verge of bankruptcy. The physical condition of the school buildings was poor, with many in desperate need of long-overdue repairs and renovations.

Since Hurricane Katrina, a new model for public education has emerged. The 58 public schools in New Orleans are now governed by two boards. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the local governing entity for all schools before the storm, has retained control of 17 schools: 5 managed by the district and 12 charter schools — public schools that are given increased autonomy in exchange for more accountability for student performance. The state-run Recovery School District (RSD) operates 39 schools: 22 district run and 17 charters. New Orleans has 57 percent of its students in charter schools — the largest percentage of any district across the country.

## THE STATE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

*The new “system of schools” is struggling, but there are some early signs of progress.* Reopening 58 schools in 20 months, after a major natural disaster, has been an enormous challenge. Operational problems in facilities, transportation, and meal service continue to plague the schools. School operators have had mixed success dealing with these issues. The RSD and the schools it

operates have been hampered by operational disadvantages, inexperienced leadership, and insufficient district staff. The OPSB appears to be doing better than before Hurricane Katrina due to its significantly smaller scope, selective enrollment policies, and improved finances. Some charter schools initially appear strong; others are struggling. Yet without comparable information on student academic achievement, it is still too early to evaluate how well schools are helping students grow academically and developmentally.

*Some building blocks for transformation are emerging.* The emergence of public school choice is a promising element of the new system, although it is currently constrained by a lack of schools, inequitable access for students, and limited information. For many schools, the increased school-level autonomy — the ability to make budgeting, staffing, and curriculum decisions at the school level — granted in exchange for greater accountability appears to have sharpened the focus on improving student achievement. In addition, the vast majority of public school operators have shown an initial commitment to developing the knowledge and skills of both principals and teachers, which ultimately should translate into improved classroom instruction.

*System-level coordination is currently limited.* A system with multiple school operators can benefit students, parents, and school leaders by fostering innovation and allowing those closest to the classroom to make key decisions. However, without sufficient support structures, individual schools are not in a position to overcome the systemwide challenges that

affect all of them, notably in the areas of facilities and finances. Also, without a single vision, unified plan, or entity guiding the long-term transformation of the system, many measures that could benefit all public school students have not been implemented.

*The New Orleans community supports public education and hopes it will improve.* The New Orleans community, nonprofits, and local universities have become increasingly involved and supportive of public education. Individuals and groups have worked tirelessly to rebuild and improve the schools. Although public opinion is mixed on whether public schools are currently better than before Hurricane Katrina, there is a strong belief that public schools should and will improve.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, we make six short-term, actionable recommendations focused on improving education for all public school students.

**1. Ensure adequate capacity for the 2007–08 year.** Since the RSD is responsible for opening and operating the majority of schools, it should take the lead on creating a team and plan to ensure enough schools are ready to open in August. This plan should include an aggressive strategy to recruit and retain teachers and staff, a process to streamline procurement, and an evaluation of innovative ways to ensure there are enough schools for all students.

**2. Equip and empower all families to choose the best public schools for their children from a range of high-quality school options.** To make choices available for all

students, families must have easy-to-understand information about public schools and all students must have access to diverse, high-quality options. Enrollment barriers should be limited, and there should be open-access schools in every neighborhood. Additionally, resources must be adequately and fairly distributed to all schools.

**3. Strengthen the RSD.** The RSD must strengthen the capabilities of district leadership, develop a 100-day turnaround plan to improve its operations, and develop and implement plans to improve special education, student discipline, and student mental health services. In addition, it should evaluate ways to engage the community, create school networks, and build the expertise of school administrators and teachers. Last, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the RSD's governing board,

should create a process and timetable for returning public schools in New Orleans to local control.

**4. Attract, develop, and retain high-quality school principals, teachers, and staff for all public schools.** Public schools in New Orleans should work together to create innovative recruitment and retention strategies aimed at high-quality principals, teachers, and school staff. In addition, schools should expand professional development opportunities that support effective classroom instruction.

**5. Support school- and system-level excellence for all public schools.** Public education in New Orleans needs a group or groups focused exclusively on supporting initiatives that benefit *all* public schools. Responsibilities would include securing and marshalling resources, facilitating collaboration, and building local and national

relationships to support school transformation.

**6. Create and endorse a short-term action plan and a long-term strategic plan for public education.** Education and community leaders should create a short-term action plan to prioritize key systemwide initiatives that require immediate action. In addition, New Orleans should create a long-term plan for public education that includes input from the community and builds on previous planning processes. This plan should be widely endorsed and communicated.

The public school system in New Orleans stands at a critical junction. With adequate support, guidance, and planning, the city can provide a high-quality public education for every one of its students and, in the process, serve as a model for other urban districts across the country.

## A New Decentralized Model for Public Education Emerged after Hurricane Katrina

