

## The Future of Public Education in New Orleans

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We see an opportunity to do something incredible.” These were the words of Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco as she signed legislation in late November allowing the state of Louisiana to take over most of New Orleans’ schools. And she just may be right. Education could be one of the bright spots in New Orleans’ recovery effort, which may even establish a new model for school districts nationally. This is not to say that the current education situation in New Orleans is not dire; nor should it suggest that the district has a history as a lighthouse of excellence.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed most of New Orleans’ public education system. In the central city’s Orleans Parish schools, fewer than 20 of approximately 120 school buildings remained usable. The storm also largely destroyed the state and local tax bases from which the school district draws its revenues. All students, teachers, and administrators were forced to evacuate, and the school district has

yet to resume the teacher salary payments it was forced to suspend. To date, only a few dozen teachers have returned to the city. The superintendent and top administrators have returned, as have school board members. Thus, New Orleans is like a rotten borough in England: nobody lives there, but there are still some pickings for the political class to work over.

The New Orleans parochial school system, which educated 40 percent of New Orleans’ students, was also devastated. Although Catholic schools have reopened in some of the highest and driest neighborhoods and some damaged schools elsewhere are reopening, it is not clear whether or when all the flooded schools will open. But because the archdiocese includes all the parishes in New Orleans, not just Orleans Parish, many of the students in the hardest-hit schools were reassigned to other schools outside the central city. The New Orleans archdiocese also set up satellite

Long before the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina or the chaos of evacuation, New Orleans’ social infrastructure was failing. News coverage of the overcrowded Superdome and the city’s flooded streets exposed the poverty and vulnerability of many residents, especially African Americans. As New Orleans begins to rebuild, can the city avoid the mistakes of the past, instead creating more effective social support for low-income and minority residents? Innovation and experience from other U.S. cities offer promising strategies for reducing the risks of poverty and opening up opportunities for economic security and success. This essay is from an Urban Institute collection that addresses employment, affordable housing, public schools, young children’s needs, health care, arts and culture, and vulnerable populations. All these essays assess the challenges facing New Orleans today and for years to come and recommend tested models for making the city’s social infrastructure stronger and more equitable than it was before Katrina.

schools in other cities to serve its displaced students. Overall, 79 percent of Catholic school students have returned to class. Catholic schools, including schools in Baton Rouge, have been instructed to take in as many displaced public school students as possible, with or without support.

If large numbers of school-age children were to return to New Orleans this year, the state and city probably could not afford to provide schools for them. However, few are likely to return quickly. Most city children now attend schools elsewhere, and no one knows whether parents will want to uproot them yet again. Certainly, families will be reluctant to expose children to molds, toxic dust, bad sanitation, and the other health hazards menacing most flooded neighborhoods. The relatively few parents who return to the city to take jobs and to restore houses are likely to leave their children in safer places. The city's poorest former residents, many of whom have found housing and income support elsewhere, probably will not return until their current arrangements expire. Even then, given the uncertain status of public services and welfare payments, the poor can be expected to weigh the risks and rewards of returning to New Orleans very carefully.

Teachers are unlikely to return in large numbers until jobs are available, and many who have found posts elsewhere will never come back. Most of New Orleans' legal and financial communities have relocated to Baton Rouge, and though most of these sectors' workers will be eager to return to New Orleans, they and the many jobs they generate are not likely to return in large numbers until the electronic, transportation, public health, and public safety infrastructures are in full operation. The numbers of utility workers and people working at hotels and the seaport will grow, but news reports confirm the logical expectation that many wage earners will leave

their families behind at least temporarily. Moreover, some adults might choose to work in New Orleans during the rebuilding boom without intending to stay.

At some point, the availability of public schools will determine whether families locate in New Orleans. But in the first three years or so after the hurricane, K–12 education in New Orleans will be a trailing phenomenon, dependent on how fast the economy and housing are rebuilt. The public school population might also be much smaller and differently composed in the future if, for example, a building boom attracts large numbers of Latino workers and families. In short, the location, size, and instructional orientation of schools will depend on developments in the economy and housing. The time is ripe to consider transforming the school district in ways appropriate for the demands it faces. Unfortunately, the district's history provides few guideposts.

### **A System with Shaky Underpinnings**

New Orleans Parish's public school system was arguably one of the worst in the country before Hurricane Katrina. In the 2004–2005 school year, only 44 percent of fourth graders proved proficient in reading and only 26 percent in math.<sup>1</sup> Eighth graders performed even worse. Twenty-six percent were proficient in reading and 15 percent in math.<sup>2</sup> Nearly three-quarters (73.5 percent) of the schools in the district had received an academic warning or were rated “academically unacceptable” in the 2003–2004 school year by the state. Thirty-five percent of the schools did not make adequate yearly progress in 2005, according to the No Child Left Behind Act.

The school district, facing a \$25 to \$30 million deficit for 2005–2006, was famously mismanaged and corrupt (e.g., phantom employees). New York–based rescue firm

Alvarez and Marshal, hired to reconstruct financial and human resource systems and to control hiring, firing, and business functions in the central office, was just getting started before Katrina hit.

Everyone recognized the sorry state of the Orleans Parish schools and the need for drastic remedies. The state board of education had already seized control of five schools, reopening them as charters, and had expected to take over many more within two years. The state declared the district in academic crisis in 2004. In the spring of 2005 Mayor Ray Nagin, working with business leaders, proposed that the city take over 20 of the lowest-performing schools in the district from the local school board and operate them as charter schools.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the Orleans Parish school district had plenty of trouble well before anyone had heard the name Katrina.

Like all urban school districts, New Orleans' school district was not built to handle the kinds of uncertainties created by the storm's wrath. The existing system was based on certain assumptions—a student population of a predictable size and neighborhood distribution, and nearly stable funding for each student. Thus, there was some reason for the district to own school buildings and commit to lifetime employment contracts with teachers and administrators. (More questionable is whether these arrangements were ever efficient.) It also made sense for the district to centralize hiring, service provision, federal and state grant administration, and other routine and predictable functions, even if it did not perform them well.

However justifiable once, these arrangements no longer make sense for New Orleans. Most of the buildings are gone and so are many of the neighborhoods. There is grave uncertainty about students: How many will there be? With what social and economic characteristics and with what academic needs? How will students be distributed across the

city, and how much money will be available to serve them? Without knowing, why should the city commit to a fixed group of teachers and administrators, or to rebuilding a central office to maintain a system built for a profoundly different situation?

It is difficult to imagine the former Orleans Parish public school system emerging again anytime soon or, possibly, at all. For the foreseeable future, the city will need to operate amid uncertainty about how many students it needs to educate and how they will be distributed across the city. The size, location, and composition of the student population is likely to shift from year to year, as neighborhoods are rebuilt and different parts of the local economy revive. At most 10,000 students are expected to enroll in the district this year, compared with over 65,000 last year. Housing and employment patterns that emerge in the first years as the city is being rebuilt are likely to change and with them the composition of the school population. Right now, all is uncertain.

For the remainder of the 2005–2006 school year, the number of children returning is unlikely to exceed the capacity of open schools. These include two district-run public schools, five charter schools in the Algiers section of the city, and up to ten parochial schools—all located in the least-ravaged parts of the city. Tulane University has also opened a new K–12 charter school in January 2006 in an existing public school building for children of Tulane staff and other New Orleans residents, and another nine charter schools across the parish are slated to accept students before the academic year ends. By next September, many more children might have returned, and at some point in the city's redevelopment the numbers of school-age children might grow very rapidly. How will New Orleans prepare for all the eventualities?

## Demography Will Be Destiny

The size and composition of the school-age population may grow in fits and starts, and might not stabilize for years. We can envision at least three different scenarios, each moving from the short term (the present to September 2008) to the long term:

- New Orleans will go through two quite different development cycles: The first—rebuilding—will attract many transient workers and their families, most of whom will live in temporary housing and leave for construction jobs elsewhere when the housing stock and businesses are rebuilt. These families will not resemble the former residents. In the second cycle—resettlement—families will move permanently to New Orleans. Many of those returning may resemble families that lived in New Orleans before the hurricane, but the size and composition of the permanent population is largely uncertain. All that is certain in this scenario is that the long-term situation will differ from the short-term situation.
- New Orleans will be resettled, but the school system will be smaller and the student population will be more evenly balanced socioeconomically and racially than before Katrina. Many of the poorest blacks with little reason to come back will not return, and a Latino population brought by the construction boom will take root in the general metropolitan area. (In southeastern Florida, the Latino population reportedly increased by 50 percent after Hurricane Andrew.) The city will become a financial and entertainment center with little industrial base, attracting both white-collar and service jobs. Central-city New Orleans will become largely an adult city, like San Francisco, populated mainly by single urban

professionals and empty nesters, and housing costs will be high.

- New Orleans will be resettled with the same or very similar residents as before Katrina, and the school-age population will reflect it. The school population will grow gradually. While it may never reach the pre-hurricane enrollment, it will look as it did in the 2004–2005 school year—over 95 percent minority, primarily black, and poor, with more than 75 percent of all students receiving free or reduced-price lunches.

Under all these scenarios, the demand for public education will be much smaller in the next few years and then grow. In all but the third scenario, student populations and their locations will change dramatically over time, but at an unpredictable pace.

To provide instruction for students who turn up, the city will need to attract high-quality school leaders and teachers and to manage schools and instructional programs adaptable to changes in student numbers, characteristics, and locations. What can the city of New Orleans (and the state of Louisiana, the federal government, and national philanthropies) do to ensure the following?

- Children who turn up in New Orleans can attend school as soon as they arrive.
- The mix of schools and instructional programs available will match the needs of the changing student population.
- Schools and teachers hired will be excellent despite the potential hardships and uncertainties they can expect.
- The district will not invest in buildings in the wrong places, or commit itself to instructional programs and people whose skills might not be needed later.

## Coping with Uncertainty While Providing Quality

The legislation proposed by Governor Blanco in November allows the state to take over any New Orleans school that falls below the statewide average on test scores and place it into the state's Recovery School District. Under this low standard, management of 102 of the 115 Orleans Parish schools operating before Katrina would be transferred to the state. The governor sees it as an effort to grasp what she called a "golden opportunity for rebirth."

In the short run, state officials could run a few schools directly, but the state lacks the manpower and expertise to run a large number of schools. State leaders have no choice but to work through third parties, and if they have already decided not to organize the new school district in the mold of the old ones, chartering or contracting are the only options.

The Bring New Orleans Back Commission has also developed a plan for New Orleans schools called the Educational Network Model. In this model, multiple providers would also operate individual schools that would band into networks based on some similarity such as provider, neighborhood, or school mission. Network managers would monitor schools and facilitate the exchange of best practices. The district office would be kept lean and focus on overall strategic issues, not school management. It would also oversee services districtwide where there are true advantages to scale and integration, such as student information management systems and accounting.

The real challenge for New Orleans will come in September 2006, when the number of students needing schools is likely to be much larger. Before then, someone must solve a lot of problems—finding competent groups to run schools (whether within the district system, as charters, or as contractors); finding buildings

to house schools; attracting quality school leaders and teachers; making sure families know how to find schools; placing children in schools not too far from home or their parents' work; linking children with schools that can meet their needs (especially children who have missed a year of instruction or do not speak English); and rapidly adapting the number, location, and instructional specialties of schools as the school population changes size and location.

No large city has had to deal with such fundamental issues before, a task made more challenging by the districts limited capacity. While New York City enrolls over 50,000 new students in some years, thanks to domestic migration and international immigration, this number represents less than 5 percent of the city's school population and the city's mixture of schools is rich and adaptable. Dade County schools have adapted to several large influxes of Cuban and Central American students, but the district was well organized and had amassed experience with previous waves of immigration—it had a good idea of what new children would need and how they would progress year by year.

Louisiana's and New Orleans' response to the challenge must be aimed at two key objectives: adaptability and quality. The many unknowns discussed here make it obvious why adaptability is important. The importance of quality is also clear: any student who moves to or back to New Orleans as families seek economic opportunities could be at risk of academic difficulties. Such children need more than ordinary schooling. In addition, reemerging or new businesses will be able to attract high-caliber workers only if the schools their children can attend are good.

Aside from the few groups operating the handful of public and private schools now open, New Orleans has no reservoir of organizations capable of starting a high-quality school. It must attract school providers

from other parts of Louisiana and the rest of the country. One pool of leaders for new schools might be displaced principals and teachers from the city's former public and parochial schools. Another might be university educators temporarily displaced from their jobs at local universities—Tulane, Dillard, Xavier, the University of New Orleans, and Louisiana State. To attract school providers with national reputations and track records for developing functioning schools quickly, the city might turn to the likes of KIPP, Edison, Aspire, and National Heritage Academies.<sup>4</sup> (How New Orleans can both attract potential school providers and screen them for quality is discussed below.)

New schools will need exceptionally good principals and teachers and unfortunately, New Orleans' instability and financial problems will make it difficult to recruit and keep the best educators. Moreover, the incentives many school districts use to attract and keep proven teachers—life tenure, generous government pensions, guaranteed assignment to a school they like, control over work assignments, strict limits on working hours, and small classes—might be counterproductive in New Orleans. The city need not make life commitments to people whose skills it might not need in the future, and it cannot guarantee educators their choice of places of work, the nature of work assignments, or class sizes over the long term. New Orleans might need, for example, to run some very large classes until the numbers of students and teachers can be matched in particular places, and some schools may have to run on odd schedules to accommodate parents' work and commuting times.

In general, New Orleans needs to attract quality school providers, teachers, and principals who value diverse work assignments and who will at least consider teaching in one school for a while and then moving to another school (or even city).

Conversely, New Orleans cannot afford to be a magnet for weak school providers, teachers, and principals who have failed elsewhere.

How can these imperatives and constraints be reconciled? We make a number of linked suggestions.

### **1. Attract quality school providers and screen out poor ones.**

- Appeal directly to Aspire, KIPP, and other national charter and contract school providers. Offer them access to publicly rented space and significant freedom in spending and teacher hiring. Promise them the opportunity to create multiple schools in New Orleans if the first school they offer attracts students and can demonstrate effectiveness.
- Appeal to university faculty throughout the South and to public and private school principals and assistant principals formerly based in New Orleans to consider taking charters or contracts for new schools. Offer four months' salary to develop a specific school proposal.
- Create a screening mechanism for new school proposals. Work with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and the New Schools Venture Fund to establish proposal review criteria that consider the quality of instructional and financial plans. Ask public and private school and system administrators from localities with high-performing schools (e.g., Clayton, Missouri; Bellevue, Washington; Evanston, Illinois) to read and review proposals for a fixed stipend (e.g., \$100 per proposal). Reject the lowest-rated third of all proposals, request revisions on the middle third, and enter into contracts with the top third.
- Issue a new request for proposals every three months until the supply of schools

has caught up with the need or no new proposals are forthcoming.

- Guarantee individuals who write winning proposals a minimum of 2 years' salary. If their school is forced to close for any reason other than their own misconduct, make them first in line when the opportunity to open or work in another school emerges.

## **2. Attract a large, talented pool of applicants for jobs as teachers and principals.**

Though charter schools will do their own hiring, they will need help attracting good teachers and administrators to New Orleans in the first place. To attract a strong professional labor pool, the same agencies that charter schools can try the following:

- Offer high salaries for teachers and provide portable pensions with immediate vesting, including generous health and life insurance without preexisting condition exclusions.
- Recruit teachers nationally with messages stressing service, adventure, selectivity, and opportunity for high pay.
- Provide teachers and principals free or subsidized housing until privately owned rentals become readily available.
- Provide opportunities for talented educators to bring new ideas and to have a say in running the schools, by being open to new ways of teaching and organizing instruction.
- Negotiate with higher-performing districts elsewhere to allow their teachers to work in New Orleans for one to three years without losing any seniority when they return home.

## **3. Screen individual applicants carefully.**

- Establish an applicant-screening center that reviews paperwork, checks references, and interviews applicants.
- Require every applicant to take at least a verbal ability test, similar to the SAT. Ask applicants to provide evidence of teaching effectiveness, including (wherever possible) achievement gains in classes they have taught.
- Usher all candidates after an initial applications screening through a rigorous, multifaceted selection process (perhaps with the help of Teach for America and the New Teacher Project) that attempts to identify perseverance, flexibility, leadership, and other difficult-to-measure attributes that contribute to success in challenging teaching situations. This process could be waived for National Board Certified teachers.
- Do not permit hiring of substandard applicants, even if it means temporarily operating schools with larger class sizes than intended.
- Allow teachers who have worked together successfully to apply as teams.
- Use an intensive summer-school program to provide extra stipends for teachers and give students a head start in school, and to further screen potential teachers by observing performance.

## **4. Define rigorous hiring terms for teachers and principals.**

- Make the hiring of fully screened applicants contingent on a school or school provider's decision to hire them.
- Allow schools to offer contingent tenure to the best teachers, assuring them a job at the school as long as it stays open.

- Avoid creating any tenure commitments outside individual schools; allow other schools to consider hiring displaced educators, but do not pressure them or offer incentives.
- Welcome back teachers who worked in the city’s public and parochial schools, but offer them a new employment deal: they will work for individual schools and their work assignments will shift from time to time with trends in the school population and school providers’ needs. They will also have to go through the same rigorous selection process as other teachers.

### 5. Make it possible for individual schools to hire teachers and provide attractive salaries, benefits, and working conditions.

- Put virtually all public education money into the schools on a per pupil basis, with all state, federal, and local funding (including facilities and maintenance accounts) combined and transferred to the school a child attends.
- Let schools buy the goods and services they need on the national market. Resist developing a central office that would tax schools for services, and allow schools to develop their own buying co-ops.
- Allow schools the flexibility to enhance teachers’ salaries, to develop innovative staffing plans (including instructional coaches, team leaders, aides, etc.), and to adjust class sizes and establish other instructional conditions, such as use of technology, that best meet their needs.
- Allow schools to give their employees already-established benefit packages, perhaps with an additional 401(k)-style pension benefit.

### 6. Make the system adaptable to changes in students’ location, demography, or needs.

- Avoid investing prematurely in school facilities; at least wait until neighborhoods and student population needs are well established.
- Rent classroom space in mixed-use buildings whenever possible.
- Allow students to establish school-attendance eligibility in Orleans Parish schools through either residence or parents’ employment in the parish, thereby both reducing student mobility as families settle and promoting a heterogeneous student population.

Taken together, these arrangements might not prove to be enough. But at least they are steps in the right direction—toward attracting substantial numbers of school providers and educators to run and staff new schools for the city’s children. To make these arrangements possible, federal, state, and local governments must act in unaccustomed ways and philanthropies must provide new forms of aid.

### Financial and Institutional Arrangements

An adaptable, high-quality set of schools in New Orleans requires the following:

**Money to make one-time investments in new school start-ups.** Although most public school systems spend little or nothing on finding and screening new educators and school providers, those functions are indispensable in New Orleans and they must be funded.

One possible funding source is the foundations—among them the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Broad Foundation—that have rushed to the city eager to help rebuild public education. These foundations are comfortable with the idea of charter and

contract schools and have already invested substantially in school providers and such quality-control organizations as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Foundations could pay stipends for individuals preparing to open new schools and fund some of their own current grantees (e.g., the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and the New Schools Venture Fund) to screen potential school providers and others (e.g., Teach for America, the New Teacher Project) to help screen potential teachers and administrators. Foundations could also sponsor a national conference for possible providers on opportunities to start schools in New Orleans.

In addition, the federal government has provided \$20 million to states to help charter schools serve students affected by the hurricane. Funds can be used for school start-up and expansion, among other purposes. The federal government has also provided another \$100 million to Louisiana for help with restarting school operations in areas identified as disaster areas as a result of Katrina and Rita.

**A scholarship plan** under which all New Orleans students, no matter where each went to school previously, can take a set amount of money to any local school. This amount (including funds for facilities rental) could come from a combination of state and federal aid. Far more than a voucher plan, the idea is to prompt the private sector to open more schools and thus promote school quality, as discussed below. The federal government has made \$645 million available from the Emergency Impact Aid program for the current school year for displaced students, even students attending private schools. This amounts to over \$5,000 per student in federal money alone and presumably would be available to returning New Orleans students.

**A state-federal partnership to fund the scholarships.** In the longer term, the funding

situation is more difficult to predict and depends on the broader economic recovery and the emergence of a new tax base. At a minimum, the state and federal governments should continue to provide the per capita share of costs they have in the past (covering about two-thirds of the total revenue), including amounts appropriated for capital expenditures. The federal government should combine all its categorical aid programs into one lump sum to afford local flexibility; it could also replace the lost local taxes (which paid about \$1,200 per pupil) with special aid, perhaps an extension of the Impact Aid, to cover any returning public and parochial students. This federal support would continue until local sales and property tax revenues grew to some per pupil share, maybe 50 percent, of pre-hurricane levels.

**State and federal funding for enhanced teacher salaries.** Starting with a 50-percent premium, this would attract enough applicants so that a top-flight cadre of teachers could be identified and schools could have some choice about whom they employ.

With respect to compensation Louisiana schools now rank 46th, with an average teacher salary of \$37,123, according to the 2004 American Federation of Teachers survey of salaries. The average teacher salary in the country is \$46,597, nearly \$10,000 more. And while the average Mississippi salary is similar (ranked 47th, with \$36,217), the Texas average is \$40,476. A 50-percent premium would bring New Orleans salaries in line with those in Connecticut—the top-paying state with an average salary of \$56,516—and probably attract enough good applicants to staff the New Orleans schools. The premium would help compensate teachers for difficult living conditions and the lack of job security. Louisiana also pays National Board Certified teachers \$5,000 extra annually, so this additional incentive could help attract these select teachers to New Orleans. Additionally,

teachers could be offered a two-year guarantee of employment.

The increased salary cost could be covered partly by a reallocation of the school district's funds. Classroom instruction (including adult, special, and vocational education) historically represented only about 55 percent of the district's expenditures, and total instruction, which included pupil support programs (guidance counselors, librarians, etc.) and instructional staff services (professional development and curriculum staff), represented only a little over 60 percent of the budget. The model we have proposed should result in significant savings in other expenditure categories, allowing a larger share to be devoted to school-level instructional effort. If a rough approximation of at least regular classroom instruction assumes 10,000 students, an average class size of 25, and an average salary of \$60,000, the per student cost for classroom teachers would be \$2,400 per student. With a benefit package of, say, 40 percent, the total classroom-level instructional expenditure would be \$3,360 per student.

Certainly there would be other costs, but the point here is that if classroom instruction had first draw on resources, the amounts necessary to fund a high-caliber instructional staff are well within the realm of possibility. The state could simply follow its current funding formula, but the federal government would have to extend aid until the local tax base grew sufficiently, as we suggested earlier.

**A new local school-authorizing agency** should be created; it alone would be authorized to permit a group to run a school with public funds. This agency, headed by a state-appointed superintendent and staffed by 5 to 10 other administrators, would be supported by state appropriations (at 1 to 3 percent of the combined operating budgets of all functioning New Orleans schools) to accept applications detailing educational and

operations plans from a wide variety of potential providers. It is critical that this body commence work as soon as possible to make judicious decisions about school providers and ensure that New Orleans is ready for a possibly large influx of new students in September 2006. The firm of Alvarez and Marshall should be retained to manage the routine financial and human resources management and information systems, so as not to distract the authorizing agency from its important educational work.

Initially, at least in elementary schools, reading and math triage schools would receive high priority. The authorizer would also administer state tests to all students at all schools and publish the results. Focused on such basics, schools would not be required to cover other aspects of the state curriculum for two years. Schools would be required to admit students by lottery but could set standards for student attendance and deportment. The authorizing agency would encourage developing specialized schools for students who need special interventions.

The local school-authorizing agency would also audit schools' books and withdraw school licenses for fiscal and academic nonperformance. The agency would continually control quality by routinely reviewing both academic and financial performance. The agency's head would serve a five-year term and could be removed only by unanimous agreement among the governor, mayor of New Orleans, chair of the state school board, and maybe the archbishop of New Orleans.

**A facilities authority capitalized by the federal government** with about \$150 million to lease space in commercial buildings that meet codes and enter contracts with developers who are building or rehabbing mixed-use buildings. This authority would sublease to schools, which would pay rent from their per pupil stipends.

**A corporate-sponsored human resources fund** that could provide grants to schools for moving costs and short-term housing subsidies for teachers and principals.

**A local nonprofit parent information agency** to inform parents about how to enroll students in schools, help them understand any student screening or testing processes, learn about schooling options, and express their preferences clearly.

### Long-Term Vision

Much about the school system's future depends on how the economy and residential patterns develop. It might be a long time before these are stable enough to support a settled, locally run system like those in the country's major cities—one that owns a complete inventory of school buildings; employs every teacher, administrator, and staff member on civil-service contracts; and maintains a large central office that does all the hiring and spending, standardizes the curriculum, and purchases instructional materials. New Orleans might even discover the virtues of adaptability and be reluctant to return to traditional district arrangements.

New Orleans might also discover the advantages of spending almost all money in the schools on higher teacher salaries, longer school days or more days in school, and technology and teacher training that fit the needs of students in particular neighborhoods. It might be reluctant to start shifting money out of the schools and into a central office where the tendency is typically to standardize and make arrangements permanent. And, if and when it does come to appreciate the advantages of decentralized control, it will likely make the shift thoughtfully with school interests in mind.

The New Orleans system, whether run by the state or locally, will and should be slow to commit funds to a fixed set of school

buildings. It may find that the life cycles of school buildings do not match family residence and employment patterns, so that neighborhoods full of children when new facilities are built have few children only 10 years later, when the buildings still are relatively new. This mismatch is already evident in such West Coast cities as Portland and Seattle, where the aging of populations in some neighborhoods and the immigration-driven explosion of populations in others makes for overcrowding in some school facilities, while others stand empty. New Orleans may also find that many parents prefer to have their children in school near their workplaces.

New Orleans might also come to value the ability to start new schools quickly to meet new needs, to replace low-performing schools with more promising ones, and to reap benefits from innovative and flexible school units. In the first few years of recovery, the city will certainly attract many new school providers and educational professionals with diverse talents.

The leadership of the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans should treat the school system as a laboratory during the next five years. Louisiana is one of the few states that have a data system with individual student identifiers so it is possible to show the movement of all students in the state over time. Information on the flow of students in and out of the schools will allow analysts to see how the schools are working. Augmented with student test scores, it can help elected or appointed leaders identify high-performing schools and their programs and characteristics, as well as unacceptably low-performing ones. A similar tracking system should be developed for teachers; their flows in and out of schools and districts can show how the teacher labor market works under these conditions.

Under this vision, the authorizing agency would manage diverse schools, most run by

community groups and other independent organizations, each designed to meet a particular need. Guided by solid information, the authorizer would manage schools' portfolios over time, divesting less productive schools and adding more promising ones. If the mix of schools did not serve a particular group of students well, the authorizer would experiment with promising new approaches until finding one that did.

Since students can establish eligibility on the basis of residence or parental employment, five years under state control also provides an opportunity to experiment with a metropolitan-based system that offers students from surrounding areas the chance to attend a city school with a state subsidy, since the subsidy would follow students. As the economy and population return to whatever the new normal will be, New Orleans will surely decide to make its best schools permanent and might also decide to invest in permanent school buildings and talent pipelines for them. Supporting such schools might lead New Orleans to adopt a hybrid model of school provision—some permanent schools with dedicated school buildings and centralized support structures coexisting with a larger set of schools still trying to prove themselves, serving neighborhoods with fluctuating populations, or experimenting with pedagogical and structural alternatives.

If it adopts this hybrid model, New Orleans might pioneer new ways of organizing public education in cities nationwide. It is not the only city with rapidly changing total enrollments, many low-performing schools, transient populations, teaching forces unprepared to meet students' instructional needs, and facilities in the wrong places. In fact, almost every large school district in the country fits that basic description. All have no choice but to run public education differently, and all must dismantle today's systems before creating new ones. In New Orleans, the

dismantling has been done. The opportunity to rebuild after Katrina is a tiny silver lining in an otherwise huge black cloud, but New Orleans and the state of Louisiana should now make the most of that hard-bought chance.

## NOTES

1. Compared with 64 percent in reading and 50 percent in math for the state.

2. <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/ssa/1560.asp>.

3. Charter schools are publicly funded schools operated by independent parties, normally nonprofits. Louisiana is one of 40 states that permit school districts and other public agencies to accept proposals from private groups that want to run public schools. These agreements (charters) are good for a fixed period of time (normally five years), but they can be revoked any time the public agency concludes that children are not learning.

Groups that receive charters are paid on the basis of the numbers of children they admit. Families are free to choose whether or not they want their child to attend a particular charter school, and teacher hiring is voluntary for both the teacher and the school. For details and up-to-date information about charter schools and their performance, see Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill (eds.), 2005, "Hopes, Fears, and Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2005." (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education.)

4. Aspire and National Heritage Academies are nonprofit organizations that run charter schools. KIPP, a nonprofit, and Edison, a for-profit, run charter schools but also run schools under contract for school districts that want to keep more control (e.g., over staffing) than is possible under a charter arrangement. All these organizations are relatively new and scientific evidence on their effectiveness is scarce, though KIPP and Aspire have developed positive reputations for motivating and helping low-income and minority students.

On KIPP, see Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel, and Richard Rothstein, 2005, "The Charter School Dust-Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement," chapter 4. (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.)

Edison is controversial for its for-profit status, and though it is committed to quality control and disclosure, results are mixed. See Brian Gill, Laura S. Hamilton, J.R. Lockwood, Julie A. Marsh, Ron Zimmer, Deanna Hill, and Shana Pribesh, 2005, *Inspiration, Perspiration, and Time: Operations and Achievement in Edison Schools*. (Santa Monica, CA: Rand.)

National Heritage Academies has rescued a number of charter schools in distress due to weak financial management, but there is little strong evidence about its academic performance.