



## REVIEW OF *THE LOUISIANA RECOVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT: LESSONS FOR THE BUCKEYE STATE*

*Reviewed By*

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### Summary of Review

In *The Louisiana Recovery School District: Lessons for the Buckeye State*, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute criticizes local urban governance structures and presents the decentralized, charter-school-driven Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans as a successful model for fiscal and academic performance. Absent from the review is any consideration of the chronic under-funding and racial history of New Orleans public schools before Hurricane Katrina, and no evidence is provided that a conversion to charter schools would remedy these problems. The report also misreads the achievement data to assert the success of the RSD, when the claimed gains may be simply a function of shifting test standards. The report also touts the replacement of senior teachers with new and non-traditionally prepared teachers, but provides no evidence of the efficacy of this practice. Additionally, the report claims public support for the reforms, but other indicators—never addressed in the report—reveal serious concerns over access, equity, performance, and accountability. Ultimately, the report is a polemic advocating the removal of public governance and the replacement of public schools with privately operated charter networks. It is thin on data and thick on claims, and should be read with great caution by policymakers in Ohio and elsewhere.

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# REVIEW OF *THE LOUISIANA RECOVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT: LESSONS FOR THE BUCKEYE STATE*

*Kristen L. Buras, Georgia State University*

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## I. Introduction

The problems plaguing urban schools across the nation—low student achievement, teacher burnout, inadequate supplies, books, and technology, crumbling physical infrastructure, and financial distress—are the subject of intense debate among policymakers. Authored by Nelson Smith, a report issued by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, titled *The Louisiana Recovery School District: Lessons for the Buckeye State*, offers an account of why urban school districts are struggling and presents charter schools as a solution to Ohio's perceived problems.<sup>1</sup>

The report asserts that centralized management of public schools by local government is responsible for the economic and academic challenges faced by urban districts.<sup>2</sup> In New Orleans, the vacuum created by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 provided charter-oriented policymakers with an unprecedented opportunity to restructure a large school district while addressing dismal student performance and its \$30 million deficit.<sup>3</sup>

**New Orleans is on track to become the nation's first all-charter school district.** Prior to August 2005, the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) operated 128 public schools in New Orleans. After August 2005, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) assumed control of 107 of the schools and converted the majority of them to charter schools, while only a handful remained under local governance through OPSB. Thus, by 2009-2010 51 of 88 schools enrolling 61% of students were charter schools, with more than 30 different providers in two different school districts—the RSD in New Orleans **governed by the state's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and New Orleans Public Schools governed by OPSB.**<sup>4</sup> While a small number of traditional, state-run schools remained in both districts, the operation of charter schools by education entrepreneurs took precedence.<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive program of alternative teacher recruitment was also undertaken.<sup>6</sup>

The Fordham report provides background on why urban schools, especially the ones in New Orleans, are faltering, and suggests that the RSD is a model Ohio should emulate.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report's foreword provides an overview of the report's findings and conclusions. It notes that Ohio public schools are overseen by "an elected group of civic-minded leaders . . . with the help of expert professionals" (p. 2). Regarding this arrangement, it issues this warning:

This system of local control may have worked well in a lot of communities around the U.S. and across the Buckeye State during much of the 20th century, but in recent decades some major urban school districts have fallen into fiscal and academic disaster with elected school boards in charge. . . .

It is hard to revitalize gravely ill schools, however, without tackling the governance arrangements that led them—or at least enabled them—to fall in the first place (p. 2).

From the outset, the report suggests that failed systems of management and governance—locally elected school boards and teachers unions—are responsible for many of the problems that plague urban school districts.

The foreword hails Louisiana's RSD as a bold alternative that has accomplished "significant gains in student achievement and consequential impacts on district-level standards and governance" (p. 3).

In New Orleans, where the vast majority of schools are now privately managed charter schools, the report finds that results have been **"very positive" in improving student performance** (p. 7). Moreover, according to the report, a decentralized governance structure has enabled school officials to promote change, including teacher and school-leader recruitment that relies on non-governmental entities to provide staffing and back-office functions (p. 12). **This reform has prospered for five years due to "its success in creating new opportunities for students, schools, and communities"** (p. 14).

Ultimately, the report concludes that Ohio's policymakers have a great deal to learn from the RSD, including the importance of:

- insulating schools from the "business as usual" climate of the state, which ideally should act as a "portfolio manager" providing oversight and accountability for autonomous schools rather than direct management;
- attracting "mission-driven entrepreneurs" to staff school turnarounds and run charter networks by "freeing" them from the restraints of traditional school governance;
- finding "legislative champions" to advance reform and a "charismatic insurgent" to provide vision and lead the recovery district; and
- remembering "how it looks to the customer" in order to defuse parent and community criticisms that decentralized arrangements create confusion or, worse, allow inequities to persist (pp. 16-18).

### III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Aside from criticizing local school governance and its purported tendency to micromanage and serve special interests at the expense of fiscal and academic stability, the report fails to offer a detailed rationale for its findings and conclusions. Its advocacy of a decentralized, charter-driven school model, such as the RSD, is based on an assumed superiority of this approach. A coherent argument in support of that superiority is not elaborated, much less empirically justified through research data.

For example, the report states that prior to 2005, New Orleans had become “a poster child for dysfunction and corruption.” On high school exit exams nearly all students fell below

*The data sources that informed the report are relatively narrow and are accepted without adequate scrutiny.*

basic proficiency, and just before Katrina an FBI investigation resulted in the arrest of 11 school-system employees (p. 4). Consideration of historical antecedents, which might provide a more accurate yet complex picture of **New Orleans' low test scores, is absent** (see discussion below). Nevertheless, the report reasons that decentralized governance, which enables a variety of school and personnel providers to flourish, is a panacea.

New school district leaders are praised for their positive influence. The attribute that sets apart traditional leaders from new leaders is that new leaders advocate charter schools (p. 10). The following equation is implicitly established: leadership *equals* charter reform *equals* improvement. Charter school reform is presented as simply better than what came before.

**The RSD's human capital strategy is likewise praised without cause. With the changes enabled by Katrina, state leaders felt “set free” because the teacher union “was essentially out of commission” (p. 14). In turn, a “non-governmental approach to support and services, particularly in the personnel area,” is portrayed as ideal (p. 13). A “blend” of native-born veteran teachers and young teachers recruited through Teach for America is assumed to produce the desired results (p. 12). Little is said about how shifting the balance toward more new, inexperienced teachers from outside of the city will overcome challenges in the district.**

Perhaps the only discernable rationale offered for the **report's endorsement of the RSD is higher test scores**. As discussed below, however, the supposedly enhanced performance of the newly reformed system is questionable when one considers actual test score data as **well as the shifting standards of school “success” and “failure” used by the state legislature.**

Charter schools and alternative teacher recruitment are presented as established common sense. **Interestingly, the report's conclusions do not include a description of improved school performance in the RSD. Rather, conclusions consist of “lessons” on how to implement the model, which the report claims has constituted progress.**

## IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Since the report critiques the lack of accountability exhibited by New Orleans public schools before 2005, one would expect it to offer detailed analysis of data demonstrating how charter schools in the RSD have improved their financial management and produced better test results. Instead, the success of such reforms is simply asserted rather than established. This is a troubling omission since adequate data and studies are available that address these points in general and for the RSD in particular.<sup>7</sup>

The data sources that informed the report are relatively narrow and are accepted without adequate scrutiny. For example, bullet points from a performance summary provided by **the Louisiana legislative auditor are reproduced in the report and lauded as “very positive”** evidence of success,<sup>8</sup> **though it later notes that “absolute levels of performance for RSD schools are not yet where they should be” (p. 7).** This does not alter the report's “very positive” assessment of the legislative auditor's finding that **by 2010, 60.3% of RSD schools had exited “Academically Unacceptable” status.** Significantly, Appendix E in the legislative audit, which is not discussed in the Fordham report, shows that all but 10 schools in the RSD in New Orleans—whether state-run or charter—**have a “School Performance Score” (SPS) below 75, the level at which roughly 54% of students are still below grade level.** Thus more than half of the students in nearly all of the RSD schools in New Orleans *remain* below grade level, despite the implemented reforms.

Reports by the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives are also used uncritically.<sup>9</sup> Not without significance, the Cowen Institute is a self-described **“action-oriented think tank” supported by Tulane University and is an outgrowth of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission** that urged the formation of an all-charter school district.<sup>10</sup> The Fordham report acknowledges that the Cowen Institute **“now directs policy for the RSD,” (p. 12)** yet this does not lead the report to analyze numerous available and independent data sources.

The report cites material from partisan websites. For example, it relies on the charter-school-incubator **New Schools for New Orleans’ “Brief Overview of Public Education in New Orleans, 1995-2009” to provide background on why the RSD was created.**<sup>11</sup> By relying on this source, it ignores comprehensive and more complex accounts of why student performance has faltered historically and why it continues to falter, including the history of racial segregation, massive resistance to desegregation, white flight, and ongoing state disinvestment in public schools attended by black students in New Orleans.<sup>12</sup>

The report also cites a blog produced by Leslie Jacobs and her organization Educate Now, which supports the decentralization of public education.<sup>13</sup> Jacobs was a lead advocate of **the RSD's establishment and is a charter school proponent, a Teach for America donor, and a wealthy member of New Orleans' business elite. Jacobs' perspective represents only one stance on the issues and is not based on expertise in the field of education.**

Other sources include writings from the online journal *Education Next*, published by the Hoover Institution, with co-sponsorship from Fordham and **from Harvard's** Program on Education Policy and Governance, as well as reports from the National Alliance for Public

Charter Schools, whose founding president is the report's author.<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia's page on "United Teachers of New Orleans" is used to discuss the history of the city's teacher union and the elimination of collective bargaining after 2005.<sup>15</sup>

All in all, the sources cited are selectively biased toward those with vested interests in current reforms. Few of these sources rely on scholarly analyses or research literature on the reforms instituted in New Orleans—sources that might have challenged some of the report's findings and conclusions.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's acknowledgements section lists those who agreed to be interviewed. A limited number of interviews were conducted with advocates of current reforms, including the heads of ReNEW charter school network; Leslie Jacobs; the chief strategy officer for New Schools for New Orleans; the president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which contracted with the state of Louisiana to oversee the RSD's charter school application and evaluation process; and John White, RSD superintendent at the time of the report's writing. This small sample of interviewees does not appear to be representative of school reform stakeholders.

An interview methodology that included a wider array of stakeholders, such as students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, would have generated a more textured and more critical understanding of education reform in New Orleans (see below). An inexcusable omission is the failure to include accounts from local newspapers that document the well-publicized concerns and conflicts emanating from school reform in New Orleans. For example, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, a general proponent of the current reforms, ran a series of articles on the struggles of black working-class families attempting to navigate school choice and the frustrations and inequities that resulted.<sup>17</sup> The Fordham report neglects these issues.

The report's methods appear intended to portray the RSD only in a positive light.

## VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

A number of concerns surrounding the validity of the report's finding and conclusions have been noted thus far. The following section will use relevant research literature and scholarly analysis to examine the report's findings.

### **The Mismatch Between the Problem and the Solution: Historical Neglect is not Resolved by the RSD Reforms**

The report opens with a section entitled, "Essential Background: Why was the RSD created?" But while it emphasizes that the "story begins well before the floods of 2005," it only charts the history of financial and academic distress in New Orleans public schools



from 1998 (p. 4). Based on this truncated account of “dysfunction” and “corruption,” the report presumes that the state-run RSD is an appropriate solution.

**A more extensive history of the city’s public schools would have suggested more compelling explanations for the district’s problems.** For most of their history, public schools in New Orleans were not intended to support children of color or their black teachers; rather, the schools were considered the property of southern whites. The history of slavery, legal segregation, ongoing racism, and white flight from the city translated into strategic state neglect and disinvestment in African American education.<sup>18</sup>

Until 1917, the state of Louisiana did not provide a publicly funded high school education for black students in New Orleans, not even an unequally funded one.<sup>19</sup> In the late 1930s, a white teacher with ten years of experience and a B.A. degree received a yearly salary of \$2,200; a black teacher with the same training and experience only earned \$1,440. In addition, black teachers often had student loads 50 percent larger than their white counterparts.<sup>20</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 led to a mass flight of white students from the city’s public schools. In 1960-61, there were approximately 53,000 black students and 38,000 white students in New Orleans Public Schools; by 1980-81, there were 72,000 and 13,000, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Despite shifting racial demographics, New Orleans Public Schools did not have its first black superintendent until 1985.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the district suffered ongoing financial crises. By 2005 the district had a \$30 million deficit. Failing to consider the role that historic and racially targeted neglect has played in producing these conditions and relying instead on narratives of mismanagement and corruption seems naïve, to say the least.<sup>23</sup>

## **Is school performance in the RSD “very positive” or positively dismal?**

### ***Academic Performance***

The report relies on the state’s School Performance Score (SPS), which is largely based on standardized test scores, to measure the impact of reforms on student achievement. The report describes “very positive findings” (p. 4) about the performance of RSD schools. However, using these scores to measure school performance is problematic on several fronts.

Although the report does not discuss the history of standardized testing in Louisiana, there is a long history of the state shifting its standards of educational “success” and “failure.” For example, the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP), which is used to determine SPS, was implemented in 1986.<sup>24</sup> When revised LEAP tests were administered in 1999, the new LEAP eighth grade tests were reportedly more difficult than the existing high school exit exam.<sup>25</sup>

Most recently, LEAP tests have been used to establish the “success” of the RSD. However, the shifting definition of academic “success” and “failure” suggests that the so-called



successes may reflect a pattern of SPS cut-off changes rather than evidence of successful reform.

In November 2005, Act 35 redefined what was considered to be a failing school in Louisiana, raising the bar from an SPS cut-off of 60 to just below the state average of 87.4. Under this new standard, 107 of 128 public schools in New Orleans were now called “failing schools” and, thus, could be folded into the RSD, whereas only 13 schools could have been counted as “failing schools” before Act 35.<sup>26</sup> Under these terms, most of the public schools were taken over by the RSD and ultimately converted to charters. In 2009 the standard was shifted downward to SPS 75. In 2010—the year that conditions for transferring RSD schools back to the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board were to

***State standards of “success” and “failure” were manipulated to justify converting public schools into charter schools, and then to justify keeping them as charter schools.***

be set by state board of education—a failing school was defined as having an SPS below 60; this enabled the RSD to justify control over a greater number of schools, which might lose their “autonomy” under local governance.<sup>27</sup> In 2011, the bar was set to SPS 65 and in 2012 was raised to SPS 75.<sup>28</sup> Under these terms, RSD schools would still be defined by a “successful” trajectory upward when compared to Act 35 standards.

**In sum, state standards of “success” and “failure” were manipulated to justify converting public schools into charter schools, and then to justify keeping them as charter schools.**

**By the legal standard that was used to justify taking over “failing” schools in New Orleans,** however, all but a handful of schools *continue to fail*; this includes state-run schools as well as charter schools in the RSD.<sup>29</sup> In fact, most schools in the RSD are failing based on the even lower standard of SPS 75. When this is brought to light the question clearly arises: Is the RSD model of reform actually generating academic success, as the report claims?

### ***Financial Performance***

In terms of financial performance, there is little evidence that the charter-intensive RSD is more efficient in its use of resources. In fact, the performance assessment issued by the Louisiana legislative auditor, which is cited in the Fordham report, found the following: “Overall, the Office of Parental Options (OPO) and RSD did not effectively monitor [its charter schools] in fiscal year 2010 and need to improve the process to annually collect, review, and/or evaluate [their] performance,” including “student, financial, and legal/contractual performance.”<sup>30</sup> The Fordham report does not mention these problems, even as it criticizes New Orleans public schools for mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of transparency.

This lack of transparency may account for the fact that Langston Hughes Academy, an RSD charter school in New Orleans, proved itself no better. Not long after the school opened, its business manager was investigated by the FBI and pled guilty to stealing \$675,000 from an annual budget of about \$6 million.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that the charter school model is **premised on heightened public accountability, RSD's then-superintendent Paul Vallas promised only to do "sniff tests" at charter schools in collaboration with the Louisiana Association of Charter Schools.**<sup>32</sup>

In light of the increase in private educational contracting associated with decentralized governance of RSD schools, one would expect the report to be more critical regarding potential malfeasance.<sup>33</sup> **But the RSD's opacity is not examined in the report.**

### **Is the human-capital strategy of the RSD effective?**

**The report praises the RSD's human-capital strategy,** which enables a non-governmental approach to recruiting and hiring personnel, particularly teachers. The emergent **"blend"** of new and veteran teachers is presented as an ideal mix for academic success in the RSD. The proportion of new and veteran teachers, however, has important implications for student achievement, which are not discussed in the report.

The Southern Education Foundation reports:

In Recovery School District schools . . . 47 percent of all teachers were entering the classroom for the first time in 2007. . . . Experience does not assure excellence in teaching, but it is well-established that students are often ill-served when most teachers in a school have little or no teaching experience.<sup>34</sup>

When veteran teachers were fired *en masse* in 2006 and the collective bargaining agreement was abrogated, the city became the site of one of the most comprehensive alternative teacher recruitment initiatives in the nation. TeachNOLA, a teacher-recruitment project organized by the RSD and New Schools for New Orleans, adopted a **"no experience necessary" posture for hiring.**<sup>35</sup> **Before 2005 only 10% of the city's teachers** were in their first or second year of teaching; in 2008, 33% were.<sup>36</sup> More specifically, in 2007-2008 60% of teachers in state-run RSD schools had one year of experience or less (only 1% had 25 or more years). By contrast, 4% of teachers in state-run schools under Orleans Parish School Board had one year or less (48% had 25 years or more). RSD charters also had a higher percentage of inexperienced teachers than did charters under Orleans Parish School Board (41% had 0-3 years of experience versus 29%, respectively).<sup>37</sup>

**While hailed by the report as progressive, the RSD's human-capital strategy presents some very real concerns.** The National Academy of Education issued an education policy white paper on **"Teacher Quality" in 2008 reporting that the empirical evidence** on the knowledge and performance of teachers recruited through alternative certification programs is mixed at best. Even more notably, a number of these programs have substantially higher attrition rates, meaning that those recruited do not remain in the

teaching profession.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Teach for America, students are grossly underprepared.<sup>39</sup>

Vallas had touted non-unionized charter schools when he was RSD superintendent, announcing: “I don’t want the majority of my teaching staff to work for more than 10 years. The cost of sustaining those individuals [with healthcare and retirement] becomes so enormous.”<sup>40</sup> Such statements reveal that the human-capital strategy endorsed in the report may have more to do with cost savings than with improving student achievement.

### Is there “sustained support” for the RSD?

According to the report, the RSD has enjoyed “sustained support” in New Orleans due to “its success in creating new opportunities for students, schools, and communities” (p. 14). Yet the report’s own conclusions betray a more complex reality, alluding to the need for policymakers to “defuse” community criticism due to negative experiences navigating the school choice system (p. 18).

A lawsuit emerged as early as 2006 over the unwillingness of schools in New Orleans to enroll low-income and special education students.<sup>41</sup> Exclusionary trends persist as charter schools erect a series of formal as well as informal barriers to entry.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, state-run RSD schools have become the dumping ground for students not wanted, admitted, or retained by supposedly open-access charter schools.<sup>43</sup> RSD charter schools admit far fewer students with special needs than do RSD-run schools: 6.27% versus 10.45%, respectively, in 2008-2009.<sup>44</sup> This has inspired substantial criticism of charter schools in New Orleans, where not all students are provided with the “new opportunities” alluded to in the report.

In a book coauthored by this reviewer, first-hand accounts document discontent with charter schools, alternative teacher recruitment, and recovery-style reform in the African American community.<sup>45</sup> One student shares her concerns about the selective practices of charter schools and RSD endorsement of such reforms:

Now, with all schools being charters, no one will have the choice of a truly public, neighborhood-based education. . . .

**I’ve lost my home, my friends, my school. I’m always on the verge of tears. But** the worst part of it all is that the public officials—both elected and hired—who are supposed to be looking out for my education have failed me even worse than the ones who abandoned me in the Superdome [during Katrina].<sup>46</sup>

The tensions surrounding the RSD takeover of most of New Orleans public schools were evident during a public hearing before the state board of education in late 2010 regarding the possible transfer of schools from the RSD back to Orleans Parish School Board.<sup>47</sup> One representative statement came from a longstanding community member, who charged:

**What we’re talking about here tonight is a simple question of democracy. We** want in Orleans Parish what every other parish has in this state, and that’s the right to control our own schools. High crimes and misdemeanors have been

carried out against the people of New Orleans . . . by the RSD and the people who run these charter **operations**. **We don't** believe that these schools have served the best interests of the majority of our African American students.<sup>48</sup>

There is a palpable sense that education entrepreneurs in New Orleans, assisted by white lawmakers in Baton Rouge, have been the real beneficiaries of reform. Perhaps more than any other aspect of the Fordham report, the nearly complete silence regarding the **viewpoints and experiences of community members who are “living through” these reforms** is egregious. It is difficult not to ask what else may be missing from the report, which portrays these contested reforms as having widespread support.<sup>49</sup>

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

Ohio is not the only state that aims to learn lessons from the RSD. As the report highlights, Michigan and Tennessee are experimenting with recovery-style districts modeled on New Orleans (p. 20). A proposal has also been offered to replace the elected school board in Indianapolis with an appointed one that would transform the district into a total choice system modeled after New Orleans.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile Vallas, former RSD superintendent, has been spreading the New Orleans model to Haiti, Chile, and Venezuela.<sup>51</sup>

Policymakers nationally and globally could use a valid report on the performance of the RSD reforms. Unfortunately, the current report, which is thin on data and thick on claims, does not meet the mark and should be read with great caution.

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See Appendix E footnote, page E2, for SPS cut-offs by year.

29 **This is evident upon reviewing the performance data provided in Pastorek and Vallas’s own plan for transferring schools back to OPSB: see attachment A in**

Pastorek, P.G. & Vallas, P. (2010, September 14). *Conditioning for success: A process to transfer schools placed in the Recovery School District*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Department of Education.

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The quotation may be found on page 171 and is based on the researcher’s first-hand observation of the public hearing, field notes, and content analysis of a transcript of the public hearing. Additional details on community concerns may be found in the chapter, which is based on analysis of the public hearing.

49 For another perspective on the politics that propelled education entrepreneurs and policymakers at the local, state, and national levels to make New Orleans the model for urban educational reform, see

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