

November 2016



The Plan for School Unification in New Orleans

What should families expect?

Kate Babineau - Dave Hand - Vincent Rossmeier

BACKGROUND

For the past decade, public schools in New Orleans have been the focus of national attention. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, building off legislation passed prior to the storm, the Louisiana Legislature voted to give the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) the expanded authority to take over low-performing public schools in New Orleans. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) only retained authority over the city's highest-performing schools. By 2014, all schools under the purview of the RSD had become charter schools and most OPSB schools became charters as well.¹ The result has been the creation of the most decentralized and unique public school system in the country, with 93 percent of students currently attending public charter schools.

Educators, advocates, reformers, politicians, teachers, and parents, locally and nationally, have watched the system develop and evolve over the past decade. The current model of public education in New Orleans remains controversial for many key stakeholders. Rising graduation rates and improved academic performance scores among New Orleans students over the past decade indicate that schools have improved. Yet, that improvement has also led many to question when RSD schools would come under OPSB control.

The Louisiana Legislature debated a measure to return all RSD schools in New Orleans to OPSB control during the 2015 session, but the bill failed to receive approval from legislators.² The 2016 session once again saw the introduction of legislation requiring immediate return of schools to the OPSB. However, legislators agreed on a compromise that requires all RSD schools to come under OPSB oversight during a two-year transition phase.³ This report examines the plan for the unification of schools created by the RSD and OPSB to meet the requirements laid out within the legislation.

Our progress has dramatically outpaced the rest of the state, although we still have much further to go in order to close the achievement gap with the rest of the state and the nation.

HENDERSON LEWIS
SUPERINTENDENT, OPSB

ACT 91

In May 2016, the Louisiana Legislature signed Act 91, which requires all RSD schools in New Orleans to come under OPSB authorization control by 2018.⁴ In doing so, legislators took the first major step towards unifying most New Orleans public schools under the oversight of the OPSB for the first time in the last decade. The migration of schools is expected to be completed by July 2018. The specific details about this governance change, however, are still being decided.

THIS REPORT

On August 30, 2016, the OPSB and RSD released their Unification Plan to the public.⁵ The plan provides detail about Act 91 and the impending changes for local schools, teachers, parents, and students. The plan is necessarily detailed, providing an abundance of information on scheduling, facilities, funding, and governance. It also offers next steps in the planning process. However, it is also a preliminary document, and many of the most important decisions about unification have yet to be settled.

This report pulls out many of the relevant points from the unification plan and arranges them topically according to areas that matter to parents, students, and the general community. The report opens with a glossary of key terms to help readers understand the wording of the plan. It then provides a timeline of important events during the unification process. Finally, the report offers an overview of how the plan addresses key topics such as accountability, facilities, staffing, curriculum, and enrollment. For each topic, the report answers these questions:

How does this work now?
What does the unification plan say?
What will change under unification?
What are the next steps?

The Cowen Institute will continue to monitor the process of unification over the next two years. During that time, the Institute will aim to provide accessible, applicable information about the process and any new developments for parents, students, teachers, and the general public. This report is part one in what will be a multi-part series on unification.

More than 10 years ago, public education in New Orleans suffered both from the results of decades of systematic decay and from the devastation of a natural and man-made disaster. *Since then, the transformation of public schools in New Orleans has been remarkable...*

UNIFICATION PLAN

KEY TERMS TO KNOW

ACCOUNTABILITY - Broadly speaking, this means - who answers to whom? How can we be sure that teachers, schools, school leaders, and board members are doing their jobs correctly? This term comes up often when talking about schools in New Orleans. Sometimes it is in the context of financial accountability (How do we know that money is being spent properly?) Other times it refers to academic accountability (Are students learning in their school? How do we know?)

ACT 91 - Act 91 of the 2016 Louisiana Legislative session is the legal act that will make the OPSB the primary governing authority of all current RSD schools in Orleans Parish. This is the act that unifies the RSD and the OPSB schools, making one system of most public schools in New Orleans after 11 years of separate governing systems.

AUTHORIZER - An authorizer is in charge of deciding when to open new schools, which charter management applications to approve, when to close schools, and whether to intervene when schools are not performing up to standards. To make these decisions, the authorizer relies upon a list of rules and policies laid out in the school performance framework. Once unification is complete, the OPSB will be the authorizer for 78 of the current 83 public schools in Orleans Parish.

AUTONOMY - Autonomy in the context of public education generally refers to decisions that are made at the school level, rather than by a district board. In Orleans Parish, most charter schools are autonomous with regards to curriculum, hiring, and finances. As schools unify, RSD charter schools will retain this autonomy, though the OPSB will become their authorizer.

CHARTER SCHOOL - A charter school is a publicly funded school granted greater flexibility in its operation than a school run by a traditional school district. The charter is a contract outlining the school's mission, program, accountability standards, and students served with the body authorizing the charter's ability to operate.

CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION (CMO) - Non-profit entities that manage two or more charter schools.

DIFFERENTIATED FUNDING - Differentiated funding provides schools with different amounts of funding based on the needs of their students, rather than basing funding on total enrollment. For example, schools with more English Language Learners or more students with disabilities would receive additional funding to provide resources for these students. This is also often referred to as student-based funding.

EL STUDENTS - EL is an abbreviation for students who are English Language Learners. These students, frequently referred to as ELL students in the past, often come from non-English speaking backgrounds and require additional instruction in English and academic courses.

ENROLLNOLA - This is the common enrollment system used by most city schools to assist families in choosing a school. It provides a centralized location for the application process, readmission, and transfer of students for most schools in the city. Families use the OneApp application website, which is part of EnrollNOLA, to view available schools, and apply for admission.

ESSA - ESSA is short for the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was signed into federal law in December 2015. This act reauthorizes the 50-year old Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the nation's education law. Under ESSA, students will still be required to take standardized tests as a measure of school performance, but states will have more control over evaluating performance and managing schools. It will be fully implemented nationwide in the 2017-2018 school year. The LDOE's work to create an ESSA plan for the state is happening concurrently to, but independently of, the reunification of New Orleans schools.

FACILITIES - The term used to refer to school buildings and property. All facilities in New Orleans are owned by the OPSB.

FUNDING - Broadly, the money schools receive to pay for programming, staff, facilities, and other costs associated with operations.

IDEA - IDEA is an abbreviation for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which is a piece of federal legislation requiring that all schools provide students with disabilities access to quality public education that meets their individual needs. IDEA is often used to describe students who have a diagnosed disability.

LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY (LEA) - An LEA is an entity that operates public schools. Usually, this is synonymous with a school district. However, for the past 11 years in New Orleans, many charter schools operated as their own LEAs. Under unification, schools will decide whether to remain their own LEA or to join the OPSB's LEA. LEA status is especially important for how schools are held accountable in meeting federal special education standards. Act 91 ensures that all returning schools can retain their independent LEA status if they so choose.

LEA RESPONSIBILITIES - These are services that the LEA is required to provide. In the case of schools that are a part of the OPSB's LEA, this includes providing special education services, grant management support, and access to federal funds.

MATRICULATION - Typically, this refers to a student enrolling in a university or college with the intention of earning a degree.

MINIMUM FOUNDATION PROGRAM (MFP) - The MFP is essentially a large grant, or sum of money, from the state to school districts to fund public schools in Louisiana. It is then up to school districts to determine the best way to spend this sum of money, within certain requirements. The amount of money that districts receive is based on the number of students in the district and several 'add-on' factors such as the number of at-risk students, the number of special education students, and certain programs that may cost extra money to operate (career and technical education programs, for example).

NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL - A colloquial expression used to describe schools students are assigned to attend because they live in the school's geographic area or attendance zone.

OPEN ENROLLMENT - In New Orleans, open enrollment means that any student is eligible to attend any school, regardless of its location or where the student lives, without having to meet any special requirements.

RECOVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT (RSD) - The RSD was originally formed in 2003 under the Louisiana Department of Education to take underperforming schools and transform them into better schools. However, after Hurricane Katrina, the RSD took over the vast majority of schools in New Orleans, nearly all of which subsequently converted to charters. The RSD currently oversees 49 charter schools in New Orleans. All of these schools will come under the control of the OPSB once unification is complete.

SCHOOL BOARD - In Orleans Parish, the school board is a group of seven publicly elected officials who are responsible for maintaining and making decisions regarding public schools. They are meant to be accessible by, and responsible to, the general public. The OPSB is also an administrative entity responsible to the board that oversees many schools in the parish.

SCHOOL DISTRICT - A geographically defined, legal district which is responsible for public education in a given area. It is generally run by a school board.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK - The School Performance Framework outlines the performance standards for charter schools and is the tool the OPSB uses to assess whether schools are meeting expectations on an annual basis, as well as to make renewal and intervention decisions. It reflects the federal, state, and local laws and policies schools are expected to follow.

SUPERINTENDENT - A school superintendent is the head administrator or manager of public schools in a school district.

TYPE 3B CHARTER SCHOOLS - A school that was formerly under RSD oversight that has come under OPSB oversight.

TYPE 5 CHARTER SCHOOLS - A school that is under RSD oversight.*

UNIFICATION - When talking about schools in Orleans Parish, unification refers to the bringing together of all RSD charters and OPSB schools under the OPSB's governance. This process is underway and is expected to be completed by 2018.

UNIFICATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE - During the unification process, this group of individuals will ensure the transition occurs smoothly. It will help develop the unification plan and can delay reunification if its members deem sufficient planning progress has not been made by the time specific deadlines are reached.

**Note: There are more than two types of charter schools in New Orleans, but this report focuses mainly on Type 3B and Type 5, which is why only those two types of schools are defined in this glossary.*

UNIFICATION

When key questions will be answered

Who comprises the Citywide Vision and Strategic Goals Task Force?

How will test monitoring fit into the accountability process?

How will alternative schools be assessed once schools are unified under the OPSB?

What will be the roles of the OPSB Superintendent and Board regarding portfolio management?

What version of the School Performance Framework will schools use?

How will facility and enrollment policies align to allow families access to high-quality schools?

What will be the process to engage school leaders?

What will be the Charter Operating Agreement template used by schools?

What is the maximum number of seats a school operator can have across the entire city?

What is the transition plan for EnrollNOLA?

What oversight and maintenance standards will OPSB use on public and private facilities?

What is the transition plan for the Youth Opportunity Center?

DECEMBER 2016

MARCH 2017

JUNE 2017

What will be included in the school facility preservation program?

How will the OPSB remain financially viable during the unification transition process?

What is the OPSB's role in helping schools to serve students with special needs?

What are the facility lease contracts for schools in the 2017-18 school year?

How will differentiated funding work under unification?

What are the standards for maintenance and repairs at all schools?

What policies are needed to allow RSD employees to transition to OPSB smoothly?

What data does the OPSB need to properly oversee schools?

How should the OPSB handle the sale of and access to surplus and vacant properties it owns?

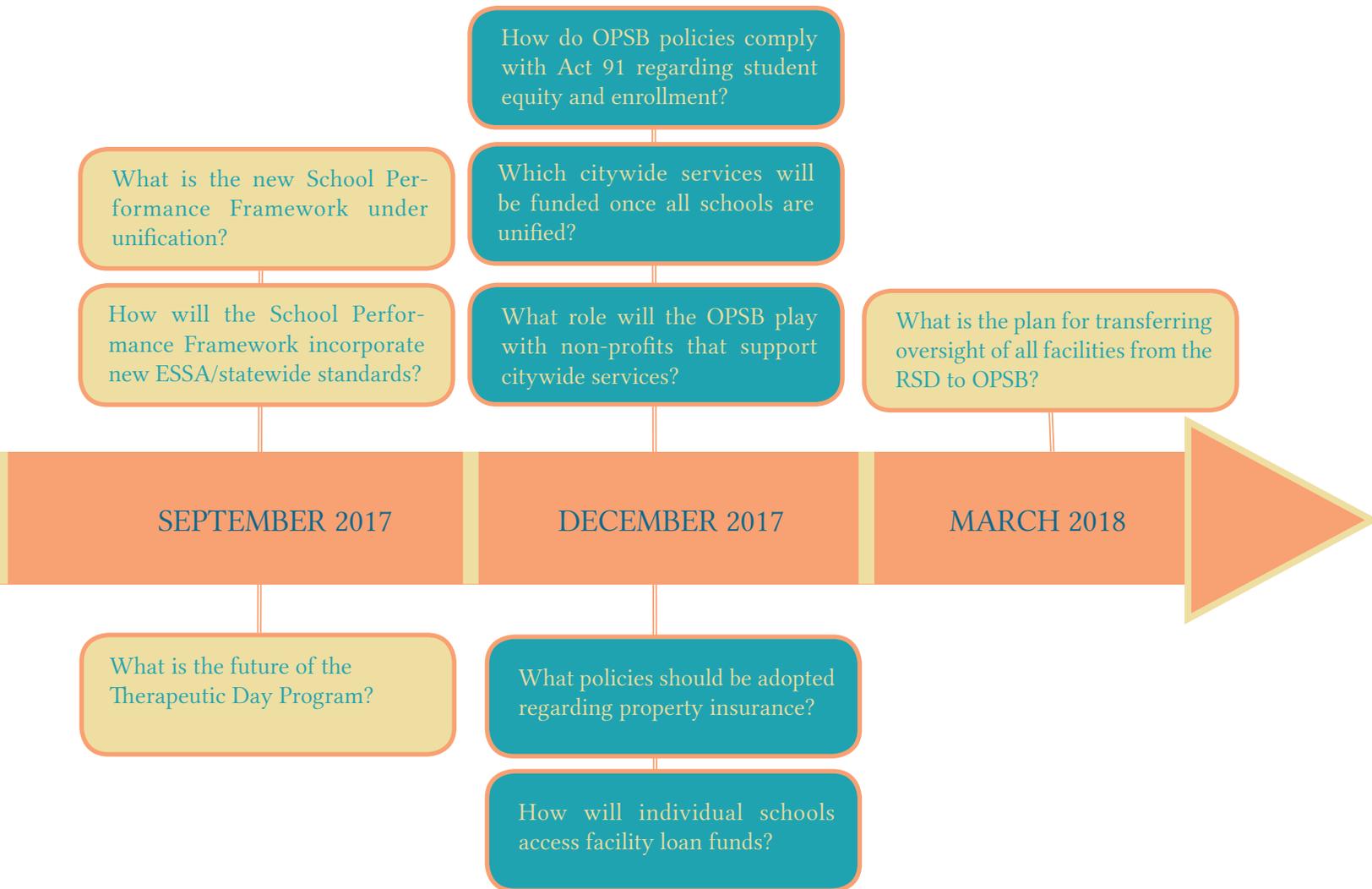
What do current OPSB schools need to know about LEA status?

What should all current RSD schools need to know about their LEA status going forward?

What are the roles of the OPSB and charter operators regarding the leasing of facilities?

UN TIMELINE:

answered over the next two years



BASIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q Will my school remain open once OPSB becomes the authorizer of all New Orleans RSD schools?

A Most likely, yes. No schools will close as a result of unification. Schools would only close if they're not meeting their performance standards, just as happens currently.

Q Does the plan say anything about the staffing of teachers and principals?

A That is up to the administration of individual schools. All decisions regarding staffing will remain with the schools, per Act 91.

Q Will students take the same classes as they do now?

A All decisions regarding curriculum will remain with schools. The plan does not affect instruction, though ESSA could affect which courses students are required to take.

Q How will this affect school performance scores?

A It will not. Accountability in New Orleans will soon change due to the passage of ESSA. But the LDOE's adoption of new state-wide standards is independent of the unification process.

Q Will I still use OneApp to choose where to enroll in school?

A Yes. The OneApp system and school choice will continue to operate as they do now.

Q When will the transition happen?

A The transition process is already underway. The process will likely be complete by July 2018.

CURRICULUM

HOW DOES CURRICULUM PLANNING WORK NOW?

Curriculum or programming can be understood as: who will decide how students are taught (instruction), what students are taught (curriculum), and which tests will be given (assessment)?

Curriculum decisions at all charter schools in the city, no matter if they're overseen by the OPSB or RSD, occur at the school level. This means that school and CMO leaders decide what curriculum will be used at each charter school. Curriculum at schools can vary widely, depending on the specific academic focus of the school or based on the principles of the charter or CMO. Neither the RSD nor the OPSB make decisions at charter schools. The OPSB does have input into curriculum decisions at the six schools it directly runs, however.

WHAT DOES THE PLAN SAY ABOUT CURRICULUM?

Very little. The RSD's New Orleans-based charter schools will maintain their autonomy as they return to the OPSB, just as the OPSB's charters also have this autonomy. Decisions surrounding programming will remain with schools.

The legislation authorizing unification, Act 91, created the framework for school return, and it does address school programming in a general way. While the legislation allows the leadership of an individual charter school and the OPSB to reach mutually agreed-upon compromises concerning curriculum and programming, it does not require them to do so. Without a mutual agreement, charter schools are assured continued autonomy over instruction, curriculum, and materials and texts used in the schools.

The OPSB and RSD did recognize in the unification plan that curriculum is a vital concern to parents and students. This is logical -- parents care deeply about what happens in the classroom. The plan highlights that the OPSB received over 100 pieces of feedback related to curriculum during community meetings throughout the creation of the plan, and over 40 comments about discipline and culture. Yet, it is not within the scope of the plan, or the legislation guiding unification, to affect curriculum in a day-to-day way.

WHAT WILL CHANGE UNDER UNIFICATION?

School programming and curriculum will not change under unification without a mutual agreement from a charter school and the OPSB. For instance, a charter school may choose to adopt the OPSB's curriculum or holiday calendar, but still retain autonomy in classroom instruction and text adoption. There are no requirements for compromise, so a school (or all schools) may choose to retain their autonomy. That means, if parents or students like the curriculum already in place at their school, they do not have to worry about unification requiring any changes to it.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

School leaders and community representatives are currently working with the RSD and OPSB to create a plan for the future. There are no immediate impacts on any schools, and unification should not alter a student's in-school experiences.

Each charter school that has come under the OPSB authority will provide for third-party test monitoring approved by the OPSB by July 2017.



ACCOUNTABILITY

HOW DOES ACCOUNTABILITY WORK NOW?

The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) serves as the ultimate authority in holding all Louisiana charter schools accountable, whether they are directly accountable to the RSD or the OPSB. Charter schools currently in the RSD and OPSB have an agreement with the LDOE known as the Charter School Performance Compact (CSPC) that outlines expectations and the oversight process. RSD and OPSB schools are already held to the same standards. This agreement includes the requirements for academic performance, financial responsibility, and other topics such as enrollment, special education, and reporting requirements. Charter schools operate under contract with BESE and the LDOE, and contracts lengths can be renewed for three to ten years depending on performance. If schools violate their contracts, this can lead to increased oversight by the state, and even result in school closure. BESE may rescind a charter school's ability to operate, even if it is authorized by a local school board, if the school has been found to have a repeated pattern of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment of students.

Act 91 requires third-party monitoring starting July 1, 2017 for schools in the year before they are up for renewal.

UNIFICATION PLAN

WHAT DOES THE PLAN SAY ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY?

The plan details a number of decisions the OPSB will need to make before 2018 regarding accountability. In 2015, the OPSB adopted a set of policies for charter schools returning from the RSD, but now with all RSD schools returning by July 2018, the OPSB must revisit those policies to ensure there is a unified accountability system for all schools. The new policies will likely be similar, but the unification plan only outlines what decisions need to be made, not what those policies will require. The revised policies will need to address differences in schools, most notably with alternative schools and how they are assessed. However, it is crucial to note that the OPSB can not change the letter grades returning schools receive or the way in which those letter grades are calculated.

The OPSB will need to create a new performance framework that includes details on how school performance will be measured and monitored. It will also need to create new operating agreements for each returning school. These agreements are contracts that outline expectations for each school. While the RSD has previously maintained the terms of these contracts, the OPSB must still figure out how these contracts with charter schools will change. The change in contract ownership is an essential component of schools coming under OPSB control. The plan states that updates to accountability policies should be introduced at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, and be finalized by December 2017. There will be several adjustments to the school performance framework due to changes in state and federal rules.

New policies will include requirements for test monitoring, corrective action, and expectations for alternative schools and charter schools that operate outside of a Charter Management Organization (CMO). The unification plan suggests that the OPSB will follow a multi-step process like the state in order to ensure that schools have an opportunity to improve before intervention or closure. The OPSB will also develop a plan for low-performing schools -- a group of schools previously ineligible to return. The policy before unification required RSD schools to be in the RSD for a minimum of two years, and have at least an SPS of 54 out of 150 points for two consecutive years before being eligible to come under the OPSB. Thirty-three of the 52 RSD schools in New Orleans were eligible to return in the 2016-17 school year. The unification plan also suggests that consideration will be given to growth measures, which could better reflect the efforts of schools to improve educational opportunities for students struggling the most. The extent of the change is currently unknown.

WHAT WILL CHANGE UNDER UNIFICATION?

This is still to be determined, but likely very little. Parents and students are unlikely to experience many changes, and the changes that do occur to school accountability standards will most likely reflect state changes to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), than OPSB changes. The LDOE will submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education in early 2017, and the plan will be implemented in 2017-18 school year. The OPSB plans to revisit their performance framework in September 2017 in order to ensure compliance with new state accountability regulations. But once again, the state's process to adopt new standards is independent of the unification process, though all New Orleans schools will be assessed under the new statewide criteria.

Arguably, the most visible change is that the OPSB will now be solely responsible for authorizing new charter schools in Orleans Parish. This will allow parents to communicate with their locally elected school board member regarding new and existing charter schools instead of driving to Baton Rouge to discuss concerns with BESE. Close proximity between charter school and authorizer will also allow the OPSB to have visibility into the day-to-day operations of schools, and potentially allow them to identify concerns or needed supports more quickly. This change in governance allows for what the OPSB, RSD, and LDOE call "portfolio planning," meaning that the board may relocate schools to different buildings if insufficient students are enrolled, and may delay or favor authorizing new schools based on the needs of individual neighborhoods. This level of consideration and control will allow the OPSB to plan new schools based on where students live. The OPSB is also responsible for ensuring that there are enough public school seats to serve every child.

Unification policy also allows for the OPSB to limit capacity for school operators. This means that the OPSB may limit the total number of seats a CMO can have in the city at all of their schools combined.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

The next milestone to watch in the near-term is when the OPSB presents a plan on changes to its School Performance Framework in September 2017.

STAFFING

HOW DOES STAFFING WORK NOW?

Currently, the OPSB's role in employment decisions at most schools is extremely limited. In traditional school districts, a centralized human resources department makes decisions about hiring, training, salaries, and benefits for schools. That is not the case at charter schools in New Orleans. Most of the city's students attend public schools where hiring and firing decisions are made by schools, not district administrators. Individual schools or CMOs have control over recruiting, hiring, and training staff, as well as over salaries and benefits. If one charter school wants to focus on literacy, it can hire more literacy experts. If another school wants to pay a top candidate more, it can do so. The OPSB only provides human resources services typical of other school-districts for its six direct-run schools and the Youth Study Center (YSC).

WHAT DOES THE PLAN SAY ABOUT STAFFING?

In truth, very little. The reason for this is that when charter schools return to the OPSB, they will maintain their autonomy as Type 3B charters. The OPSB will retain a role as an authorizer. It will evaluate and assess whether schools are meeting accountability and financial standards, as well as determining whether schools are serving all students equitably. It will not be involved in the day-to-day running of schools.

However, the unification plan does address two crucial components that affect school staffing. As part of the OPSB's central role in planning, it will be tasked with ensuring that there are the right number of schools, and seats in those schools for all students. This type of demographic and enrollment strategic planning affects school staffing, as schools will make hiring decisions based upon how many students they serve.

Additionally, the plan also mentions that the OPSB will help to develop a strong pipeline of new school candidates to meet the needs of New Orleans' students. Though the plan does not provide thorough details on how OPSB will cultivate this pipeline, the goal of this effort will be to have a backbench of high-quality school operators who are ready to open schools in New Orleans when growth in enrollment necessitates launching additional schools. The OPSB would serve as a centralized recruitment entity.

WHAT WILL CHANGE UNDER UNIFICATION?

For the vast majority of students in New Orleans, unification will not lead to any changes in how their school can staff schools. Choices about who teaches and works in schools will remain at the discretion of individual schools and CMOs for all charter schools. As is true for its existing schools, the OPSB also will not be able to force any school staff to unionize. In addition to the cultivation of the school talent pipeline, the unification plan does state that the OPSB is committed to managing system-wide aspects of human resources for all the schools within its portfolio. The details of what this will encompass will be decided during the unification planning process over the next two years.

The only other change outlined in the plan regarding staffing will involve human resources decisions made about the citywide services currently run by the RSD. The New Orleans Therapeutic Day Program and Youth Opportunity Center will transition from RSD to OPSB control, and the OPSB will have control of the staffing of these initiatives. Additionally, the OPSB will continue to have involvement in staffing at its six direct run schools, as well as the Youth Study Center, which it already operates.

Many of the policy decisions regarding the accountability framework for schools will have an indirect effect on school-level staffing. How the OPSB elects to assess academic requirements and targeted supports for students with special needs will ultimately have an impact on how schools and CMOs decide to staff their schools.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

The most important milestone to watch in the near-term is when the OPSB presents a plan on changes to its School Performance Framework sometime during December 2016 and January 2017. As mentioned previously, this framework will determine how schools will be assessed and therefore will have an impact on how school leaders and operators decide to staff their schools.

ENROLLMENT

HOW DOES ENROLLMENT WORK NOW?

Currently, all RSD and most OPSB schools in New Orleans participate in a centralized school application program called OneApp, which is operated by EnrollNOLA. OneApp allows parents to fill out a single application that can be used to apply to all participating, open-enrollment schools in the city. The EnrollNOLA website is the main hub for the application and enrollment process. In addition to managing OneApp, EnrollNola also oversees Family Resource Centers and Early Childhood enrollment throughout the city. Right now, the RSD is in charge of managing EnrollNOLA, providing staff and technical resources for its operation.

The majority of schools in New Orleans are open enrollment, which means that they don't grant or deny students admission based on any specific criteria, including where the students live. Any student can attend such a school. All RSD and many OPSB schools are a part of OneApp. However, some schools in New Orleans maintain selective admission procedures. For example, they require that students have certain academic test scores, foreign language skills, or require parents to attend open houses in order for students to be eligible to enroll. These schools are allowed to participate in EnrollNOLA if they are explicit and public about their requirements on the website, but not all do. By July 2017, only three schools will not be a part of OneApp. Under a policy approved by the OPSB last year, all schools will have to join OneApp once their contract comes up for its next renewal, in 2021.

Here's how OneApp works: parents login to EnrollNola and complete an application for their student. During that application process, parents also create a ranked list of their preferred schools. Then they submit the application to EnrollNOLA. After a waiting period, students are assigned to one of their selections based on a mathematical algorithm that considers school preference, sibling enrollment, and geographic location, among other factors. In 2015-2016, 82 percent of students were matched to a choice school, and 54 percent were placed in their first choice school.

WHAT DOES THE PLAN SAY ABOUT ENROLLMENT?

According to Act 91, the OPSB will ensure a responsible transition of EnrollNOLA from RSD management to the OPSB. However, the plan explicitly states that the role of the OPSB is "not to manage and direct all of these efforts, but to help support these services where appropriate, coordinate connections with schools where needed, and work with leaders throughout the city to identify unmet needs." As it currently stands, the role of the OPSB in managing EnrollNOLA is not yet cemented, but the OPSB will ultimately be responsible for the application process.

WHAT WILL CHANGE UNDER UNIFICATION?

As of now, it seems as though the enrollment process for students in New Orleans will remain largely unchanged under unification. EnrollNOLA will be under new management and over time, all schools will be required to participate. Those schools already participating, however, will continue to do so and the system will continue to operate as it has for the past few years. The exact role that OPSB will play in the management of EnrollNOLA is not entirely clear and as such, it is possible that changes may occur once plans become more solidified. But, there are a few key changes to the enrollment system under the unification plan.

Currently, the RSD is responsible for managing the EnrollNOLA system. With unification, responsibility for running the program will shift to the OPSB. So the OPSB will provide the necessary staff, resources, and technical support to ensure that the centralized enrollment system in New Orleans continues to function efficiently.

Under unification, all OPSB schools will be required to participate in a common enrollment system. Act 91 states that the OPSB is "fully empowered to adopt policies to govern these systems and incorporate provisions." Schools are also required to participate once they come up for their next charter contract renewal.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

The OPSB and RSD are working together to develop a detailed transition plan by December 2016, with a focus on EnrollNOLA. Starting with this 2016-2017 academic year, OPSB and RSD leadership will be conducting regular meetings.

In 2017-2018, the EnrollNOLA team will move its physical location to the OPSB offices. The formal transition of administration from the RSD to the OPSB will happen by spring or early summer of 2018 (before July 1).

FACILITIES

HOW DO FACILITIES OPERATE NOW?

Currently, the RSD manages the facilities for schools under their control while the OPSB manages the facilities for schools under their control. But, the OPSB owns all the school facilities in the city -- including those currently leased and used by RSD schools. RSD is responsible for paying maintenance fees on their buildings.

For the past ten years, school buildings and facilities have been a point of concern for school districts, educators, parents, students, and the greater community. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, more than 80 percent of school infrastructure in the city was left unusable. A series of negotiations ensued between the RSD, the OPSB, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding funding to restore and build school buildings. These negotiations led to a \$1.8 billion settlement and a massive overhaul of school facilities in New Orleans. The final plan, reached in 2011, had a goal of building 35 new schools, and completing 18 full renovations and 28 refurbishments by 2016. As of 2016, this plan was approximately 90 percent complete. Of the 81 schools proposed, 30 are finished, 42 are under construction, and nine are in the design phase.

OPSB's role is to plan for how all district-owned facilities are used and where new buildings may be needed, to set standards around maintenance and design, and to oversee a pool of maintenance funds that schools can draw on to support their own planning priorities.

UNIFICATION PLAN

WHAT DOES THE PLAN SAY ABOUT FACILITIES?

A lot. Under Act 91, responsibility for maintaining all RSD schools, facilities, and buildings will be transferred to the OPSB. The RSD, however, will continue to administer funds provided by FEMA for the development and restoration of school buildings, as agreed upon in the original settlement. Once the OPSB takes control of facilities, they will manage and be responsible for the following areas:

- Building Oversight:** The OPSB will oversee daily maintenance and long-term issues with individual school buildings. This could include fixing a broken window or a leaky roof.
- System Wide Planning:** The OPSB will make decisions about whether to build new buildings, where and how any new facilities should be built, the use of transition buildings, and the sale of facilities. It also means that the OPSB will continue to decide which schools occupy which facilities.
- Building Assessment:** The OPSB will evaluate the condition of buildings on a regular basis to know if or when new buildings or major repairs will be required.
- Design Standards:** The OPSB will set city-wide standards for new construction and renovations according to its budget. The goal of these standards is to ensure buildings are safe.
- Facilities Preservation Fund:** This is one of the biggest projects regarding facilities. The OPSB will begin developing a central fund for schools to invest in building maintenance and preservation. The details have yet to be finalized but the plan states that the aim is to have a revolving loan fund available to schools with OPSB oversight by 2021.

According to the plan, the OPSB will also focus on training relevant school leaders and employees on facilities financing once unification occurs. The plan indicates that over time, individual schools will increasingly control their own budgets and facility / building planning. What that means for schools on a day-to-day basis has yet to be determined.

WHAT WILL CHANGE UNDER UNIFICATION?

There are a few key changes that will occur under unification with regards to buildings and facilities. Most notably, the OPSB will take control of all buildings, facilities, and property that are currently overseen by the RSD. However, property belonging to a charter operator will remain the property of the school. In addition to a shift in building management and oversight, the OPSB is going to develop a new centralized funding source for facility maintenance and preservation. However, at this stage, most of the details of facility management and funding have yet to be decided. The OPSB will spend this year developing policies and procedures for the management of school buildings and facilities under their oversight.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

With regards to facilities, the next steps involve mostly planning, training, and evaluation. In the 2016-2017 school year, the OPSB will conduct a full needs-assessment of all buildings that will be under their control to determine how to prioritize their funds. The OPSB will also train employees on Facilities Finance prior to the development of policies for the Facilities Preservation Fund. Some schools may remain under the RSD's operational jurisdiction after unification because state and federal dollars obligated to the RSD cannot be reassigned to the OPSB. The RSD is required to complete all projects funded by these dollars.

By June 2017, the OPSB will have developed and implemented standards and policies for repairs and replacements that can be funded through the School Facility Preservation Program. Basically, it will have decided how these funds can be accessed by schools and what they can be used for. The OPSB is also working to establish clear maintenance and repair standards for all buildings and making final decisions about building sales and how to manage vacant buildings.

By December 2017, the OPSB will have developed policies to secure property insurance for all buildings and a plan for the revolving facility loan fund and individual school accounts. This issue is important because RSD schools have been eligible to participate in Louisiana's Office of Risk Management insurance pool. Upon returning to the OPSB, their rates may increase because the OPSB has its own insurance and does not have the same size or leverage of the statewide program. The long term goals include a revolving loan fund available to schools by the year 2021 and a plan for long-term funding by 2024.



WHAT'S NEXT?

The past 11 years have brought about tremendous changes to the public education landscape in New Orleans. The unification of all RSD and OPSB charter schools under the OPSB is just the next step in the evolution of New Orleans schools post-Hurricane Katrina -- a beginning, rather than an end. And right now, the unification plan is just that - a plan: many important decisions regarding unification and the transition process have to be finalized and the next two years will likely see continued change.

The OPSB and the RSD will continue to engage the public and education stakeholders through public meetings and convenings. As decisions are made and key unification milestones are reached, the Cowen Institute will regularly provide updates on the process with the goal of informing parents, students, and the public at-large.

END NOTES

1. There are five schools in New Orleans that are not overseen by either the RSD or OPSB: four are overseen by BESE and one is authorized by the Louisiana Legislature.
2. Dreilinger, Danielle, "No Return for Recovery School District charters: Bill fails in House," nola.com, May 19, 2015, http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2015/05/rsd_school_return_to_orleans_f.html.
3. Prothero, Arianna, "All New Orleans Schools Set to Return to Local Oversight," Education Week, May 18, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/05/12/all-new-orleans-schools-set-to-return.html>.
4. Louisiana Legislature 2016, Act 91. <http://www.legis.la.gov/legis/ViewDocument.aspx?d=1003434>.
5. Orleans Parish School Board. *Unification Plan*. August 2016. <http://opsb.us/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Unification-Plan-Aug-30-OPSB-Approved.pdf>.

For more information and
new research and policy analysis,

visit www.coweninstitute.org

