

New Orleans Schools Four Years after Katrina: A Lingering Federal Responsibility



Southern Education Foundation

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The Southern Education Foundation

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SEF thanks all in New Orleans and Louisiana who assisted in this report and who continue to exhibit great determination and courage efforts to restore and improve education for all children in their community. In particular, SEF would like to acknowledge the work Ben Johnson, former President of the Greater New Orleans Community Foundation, who conducted interviews and community forums that helped to illuminate the issues of this report.

Steve Suitts, SEF Vice President, is the author of the report and was responsible for its research and analysis. He had the assistance of Lauren Veasey, SEF Program Officer, and Vanessa Elkan, SEF Program and Research Fellow, with fact-checking, references, and pre-publication design.

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With support and assistance from the Ford Foundation



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Foreword

This report provides a broad overview of what has happened in New Orleans public schools over the four years since Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. It documents the sometimes conflicting, confusing and confused efforts mounted by an array of state and local governments, as well as by the federal government, to reconstitute a public education system for hard-hit New Orleans. The report contains some good news about improved levels of student achievement in newly reconfigured schools in New Orleans, as well as serious cautionary notes and observations that warrant consideration by all those seeking to build on and sustain the progress made to date.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in August 2005, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) began research and advocacy efforts to help address the educational needs of the city's thousands of students. Most were displaced from New Orleans after the storm and later enrolled in schools across the nation, many of which lacked the necessary resources to provide quality outreach and services to their new charges. These students are no longer separately accounted for as a subset of public school students in most receiving districts, and it is now unclear how most of them are faring in their new environs compared to other students in those schools. Anecdotally, it is evident that many are still showing the negative side effects of pronounced periods of absence from school and untreated trauma-related disorders.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, SEF sought to influence the thinking and action of government and the nonprofit sector to ensure comprehensive services to displaced children and students, but such efforts bore mixed results. SEF's 2007 report, [*Education After Katrina*](#), downloadable free of charge from SEF's website, sets forth findings and recommendations that, if heeded, would have significantly helped students recover more fully from the storm's impact wherever such students were located. After the storm, SEF also raised and disbursed over \$4 million to help displaced college students previously enrolled in damaged historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in New Orleans enroll in other HBCUs on an interim basis.

This report is a snapshot of New Orleans public schools today. It is a snapshot of a “work in progress,” the sustainability of which is uncertain. The schools of New Orleans today serve a much smaller number of students than before Hurricane Katrina. Many public schools have selective admissions requirements, resulting in significant clustering of students by race and class. This is very worrying and should not be allowed to persist. Still, overall, New Orleans has today public schools that, as a group, are achieving higher student learning outcomes than the essentially failing and underachieving public schools that were in place when the storm hit. That is the good news.

New Orleans has more public charter schools than any public school system in the country. The bad news is that the local tax base, augmented by state and federal monies, is too limited to sustain the promising status quo, let alone expand it, without a significant additional infusion of funds and resources over time. Louisiana is, however, a largely low income state and lacks the tax base to do what will be necessary to respond to growing numbers of returning students. Without assumption of responsibility by the federal government to help New Orleans schools continue to improve over the long haul by making necessary funds available, the progress made to date could become a “flash in the pan,” to the detriment of all.

Herein lies the challenge: Will our nation take advantage of the opportunity to test at scale the promise of public charter schools to improve learning outcomes of the students who need help the most? Will it harvest lessons about which aspects of New Orleans’s changed system appear to account for the progress, and use those lessons to inform national policy formation in relation to public schools more generally and charter schools in particular? Or, with the passage of time, will the federal government walk away from this extraordinary opportunity to strengthen a school system literally from the ground up? Through inaction and neglect, will it shirk its obligation to help repair the education infrastructure of a city that was destroyed due to faulty, federally constructed and maintained levees?

America has in recent years developed, in my opinion, low expectations of its public schools and the low income students whom they serve. New Orleans has the chance to counter this trend through sustained educational progress. New Orleans, watched not only by the nation, but also by the world, will set the bar for national policy regarding the level of commitment of the federal government to helping state and local school districts meet essential resource needs of public schools. If it is set low for “Katrina’s kids,” who were hurt and affected so deeply through no fault of their own, how will the government warrant an increased assumption of funding responsibility for other districts across the country that serve low income students? What will the federal role be in addressing issues of resource inadequacy between and among the states that comprise our great nation?

New Orleans public schools are showing progress in the face of adversity. Their positive efforts should be acknowledged and rewarded through resource allocations commensurate with the educational challenges that lie ahead. This is a matter of simple fairness, as well as enlightened national self-interest in creating a well educated populace able to compete in the skills-driven global economy.

One final thought: Newspapers, including those in New Orleans, often contain disturbing stories and statistics about increased crime. The road to the jailhouse always passes by the schoolhouse. Prisons and jails bulge with people who lack the education necessary to make good choices and to take advantage of economic opportunities. America will pay now or later to address the needs of such people, but pay we will. Why not invest in “an ounce of prevention” rather than “a pound of cure?”

Lynn Huntley
President
The Southern Education Foundation
October 2009

Introduction

Four years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has become one of America's most important, unique experiments in public education. The New Orleans public schools today are populated largely by minority and low income students—the children who will soon become a majority in America's K-12 public schools.¹ New Orleans is also the only major city in the United States where public education has re-started practically from ground zero and where a state government now operates more public schools than a local school authority. Struggling to re-invent effective public education, New Orleans now leads the nation in the percentage of students attending charter schools.

These developments have emerged because New Orleans is also the only major city in recent US history where the mistakes of federal agencies contributed in large part to the complete evacuation of its residents, near-total devastation of its public infrastructure (including its public schools), and the dislocation of more than 50,000 students for over a year.² While the federal government has invested substantial funds to rebuild parts of New Orleans and to sustain its residents and former residents since the 2005 disaster, its role in restoring public education for New Orleans students has lacked adequate funding, assistance, and attention. New Orleans desperately needs the national government to fulfill, albeit belatedly, its role and responsibility to help rebuild safe and adequate school facilities, ensure effective instruction, and realize the potential of the city's public schools to emerge as a place of excellence in education in the aftermath of one of the nation's worst disasters.

New Orleans is not a model of school reform today, but it promises to be an important and unique laboratory for improving an entire public school district. It offers a set of real-life prospects and challenges for the nation to discover and help create a system of urban schools whose minority and low income students perform at high levels. America has some *schools* with predominately low-income and minority students performing at high levels over time, but for the most part, there does not exist anywhere in the nation an urban school system with a large percentage of these students performing at high levels.

All in all, New Orleans public schools require a special, ongoing federal commitment to undo years of inadequate public education that were vastly compounded by the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. The complicity of the federal government in failing to effectively prevent and respond to breached levees establishes an indisputable federal obligation to undo the damage. It is not too late for the government of the United States to help improve the future education of New Orleans's schoolchildren. It is not too late for pronouncements of national aspirations for excellence in education and promises of federal assistance to become more than illusory promises.

Background

New Orleans public schools were already in crisis in the years before Hurricane Katrina. In 2002, only about one in seven 8th grade students scored at basic or above on the state's mathematics tests. In 2004, New Orleans schools had a debt of over \$250 million. A year later, Hurricane Katrina devastated most of the city's school buildings, equipment, buses, and supplies and sent thousands of K-12 students, educators, and their families fleeing on foot to the Superdome and across the country in cars, buses, and airplanes.

During 2005-06, most New Orleans students missed a significant amount of schooling. As many as 30,000 Louisiana students, primarily from New Orleans, missed virtually the entire school year.³ Others attended schools in 49 states and the District of Columbia for considerably less than a full school year.

The vast majority of displaced students from New Orleans enrolled in schools in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. These states often had insufficient numbers of classrooms, desks, chairs, books, supplies, and school personnel (especially counselors and administrative staff) for the displaced students. A significant percentage of Louisiana schools failed to add personnel to serve these displaced students—primarily due to a lack of funds. Schools with displaced students reported increases in disciplinary problems and a large unmet need for mental health counseling. Displaced children living

in federally provided trailers in 2006 missed as much as one in five days of school and had serious health problems that often went unaddressed.

Most displaced students also exhibited extremely poor academic performance at the end of school year. In Texas, for instance, displaced students scored an average of 21 percentage points below other students on state reading tests. Yet, when the school year ended in the summer of 2006, there were few, if any, intensive summer programs in most states and communities (including New Orleans) to help these students catch up in school.

Nearly 20,000 students returned to New Orleans public schools during 2006-07, a tumultuous year. School officials appeared incapable of handling the steady influx of new students and of providing basic necessities—everything from bathroom supplies, edible meals, and school supplies were lacking—as well as a safe, clean learning environment. Students in New Orleans public schools that year scored at pre-Katrina levels on most state-mandated tests.

Despite these problems, education recovery was not a high priority for the federal government in the months and years following Katrina. Barely 2 percent of all US government funding committed to address the disastrous aftermath of the hurricane went towards education (K-12 and higher education) during the first two years after the hurricane. Federal funds did not cover the real costs that various local school districts incurred to enroll and educate displaced K-12 students. There were no federal funds to locate, support, or re-engage as many as 30,000 K-12 students who dropped out of school in the year of the hurricane. The Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) made available only a limited amount of funds and an enormous amount of red tape for re-starting schools in New Orleans.

The Southern Education Foundation's special report in August 2007 summarized the federal response to the educational needs two years after Katrina:

The federal government...failed to make an adequate, good faith effort after the storm to insure displaced students were educated as they scattered across state lines. It essentially...abandoned thousands of the most disadvantaged students. It...failed to help insure the rebuilding of the public education infrastructure that provides low-income children

with their best opportunities for a good life in the future...The students are still there. They still need assistance and opportunities to recover and succeed.

During the last two years, the federal government has helped to fund basic repairs and renovations in some New Orleans schools. With the aid of the federal government, the first new school building for New Orleans K-12 students opened in August 2009. During the first nine months of 2009, FEMA committed more than \$150 million for school renovations in New Orleans. Yet these funds constitute less than one-eighth of the projected cost of rebuilding all the city's public schools.

The state government's response to the educational problems after Katrina has primarily involved taking over most of New Orleans's public schools from the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB).⁴ In 2003, the Louisiana legislature had established a special state school district, the Recovery School District (RSD), administered by the Louisiana Department of Education, to take over and improve schools failing to meet minimum academic standards for at least four consecutive years.⁵ Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the RSD had assumed control of five low-performing New Orleans schools; after Hurricane Katrina, an additional 107 New Orleans schools were transferred to the RSD.

Lingering Legacies

Hurricane Katrina in late 2005 literally washed away the old, failed system of public education. But, the disaster also destroyed or damaged most public school buildings in the city and left its school authorities with financial obligations, legacies, and ongoing needs that jeopardize the future education of most New Orleans children.

The devastation to the public school buildings and facilities was massive. When the hurricane hit, almost all of New Orleans's school buildings were more than 30 years old, and many were more than 50 years old. As a result, most facilities were baldly damaged or ruined by the massive flooding unleashed by inadequate or broken levees. Today, New Orleans school authorities are implementing the first phase of a \$1.6 billion master plan for rebuilding and modernizing the city's schools, but they lack as much as \$800 million in funding for the second phase.

The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) already carries approximately \$460 million in long-term debt accumulated both before and after the hurricane. In addition, OPSB annually incurs as much as \$6 million in costs for the pensions and health care of retired employees, workers compensation for former employees, and legal fees related to personnel litigation from prior years.

These obligations are especially large for a local school board that has currently little more than 10,000 students, one-fifth the total under the board's jurisdiction before Hurricane Katrina. In 2006-07, OPSB spent \$4,254 per pupil—ten times the state average— just for interest payments on existing debts. In another measure of non-operating costs, OPSB reported spending \$11,228 per student for “other costs” in 2006-07, while the average “other” costs for a Louisiana school district was \$1,276.

Governance of New Orleans Public Schools

Both the locally elected school board and the state-appointed school board operate public schools in Orleans Parish, but the authority for the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) to operate New Orleans schools will end after 2010 unless it is renewed by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).

A state takeover of failing public schools is not unusual in American public education today. A majority of the states have enacted laws or promulgated administrative orders that allow for a state takeover. Never before, however, has a state effectively replaced a local school authority with a state agency for the purpose of operating most public schools in a large urban area.

In New Orleans, continuing state control of the local public schools is controversial but appears to have considerable support among registered voters. An opinion survey in the summer of 2009 revealed that only 21 percent of the respondents preferred local school control to occur in the “next year or two,” and 45 percent wanted the schools *never* to return to the local school board's control. Also, virtually two-thirds of the city's respondents stated they trusted the state-run RSD more than the locally elected OPSB to “build new schools and renovate old ones.”

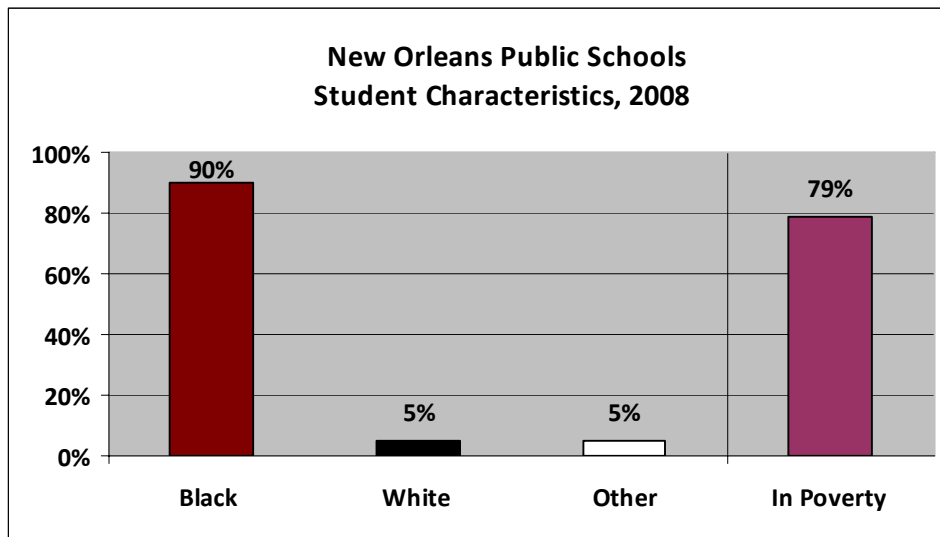
New Orleans' RSD and OPSB schools disagree about which agencies should shoulder the various costs from past obligations, and there are valid arguments on all sides. But this dispute obscures the overarching problem: costs from past debts as well as continuing obligations to retired and former employees in combination with ongoing rebuilding expenditures are far beyond the capacity of any and all local public schools

and public school systems to meet over time without sacrificing the basic necessities of educating students.

In the 2008-09, OPSB budgeted expenditures of \$3,878 per pupil for debt payments alone. Even if these costs had been spread across all New Orleans public schools, including those in the Recovery School District, the debt-related expenditures would have been \$1,127 per pupil in 2008-09. In combination with the increased costs of financing up to \$1.6 billion in bonds for necessary school building and renovations, these burdens are unsustainable for any and all local schools and school systems, unless school authorities in New Orleans secure other means of paying for the ever-increasing costs from the past.

Characteristics of the “New” New Orleans Public Schools

In late 2008, almost 36,000 students attended K-12 public schools in New Orleans, approximately 55 percent of the enrollment before the hurricane. The number of students enrolled in the public schools of Orleans Parish has increased by more than 10,000 since October 2006, when schools fully re-opened. Children of color comprised approximately 95 percent of the student population (90 percent were African American), and 84 percent were low income students (79 percent living in poverty) in the 2008-09 school year.



There is a wide range of types of public schools in New Orleans. The Recovery School District operates both regular schools with zones of attendance and authorizes

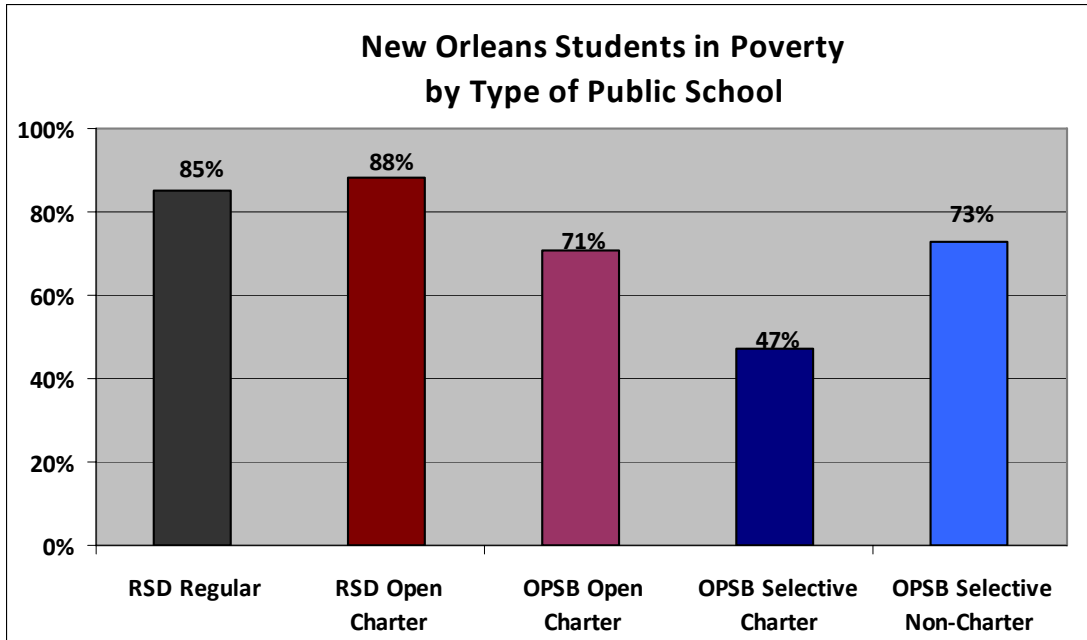
independently-run charter schools that operate on the basis of first come, first served. OPSB operates regular public schools and has “selective admission” schools to which students compete for admission on the basis of academic performance. It has also established charter schools, some of which have open admission and others of which have selective admission. With such structural diversity, New Orleans does not have one system of public K-12 education. It has a collection of different systems, although in 2008-09 most New Orleans students in the public systems attended a charter school, the majority of which are run by the RSD.

Charter Schools

Among the 89 public schools open in Orleans Parish in October 2008, 48—more than half—were charter schools.⁶ Approximately 57 percent of New Orleans public school children attended a charter school in late 2008—the largest percentage in the nation.

In 2008, thirty-four of Orleans Parish’s 48 charter schools were operating under the jurisdiction of the RSD with a policy of open admissions for students across the city. No academic criterion was used to determine if a student would be admitted, and students were accepted on a first come, first served basis. The Orleans Parish School Board had 12 chartered schools, seven with open admissions and five with selective admissions.

Overall, the demographic profile of Orleans Parish students attending charter schools with open admissions does not differ significantly from the characteristics of students attending the city’s traditional public schools. There are, however, large differences between the student populations in selective admissions charter schools and in regular public schools in New Orleans. The percentages of both African American students and students living in poverty attending RSD’s traditional schools and open-admission charter schools were approximately double the percentage of those attending OPSB selective admissions schools.



There were also differences in finances for charter schools. According to an analysis by the Tulane University's Cowen Institute, OPSB charter schools in 2008 received average revenues of \$7,600 per student from state and local governments in comparison with \$7,390 per pupil for the RSD charter schools. In the prior year, it also appears that RSD charter schools received less money from state and local governments.

In addition, charter schools varied widely in the way they spent available funds to educate students. Some charter schools have spent more than the state average expenditure on instruction; some spent less. For example, according to state data, Martin Luther King Elementary spent only \$283 per pupil in 2007 on student support programs --- far less than the state average and less than half the average for regular RSD schools. Another RSD charter school, Samuel Green, spent more than the state average. At the same time, most RDS charter schools in 2007 paid their teachers somewhat less in salary than the state average, while both the RDS regular schools and the average OPSB schools spent more than the state average on teacher salaries. Among charters, these decisions are made by the school's leaders, not the school district leaders.

Race and Poverty in School Enrollment

Very few white students attend public schools in New Orleans. In October 2008, only 1,876 white students—merely 5 percent of the total public school enrollment—were in Orleans Parish public schools. This pattern is nothing new in the recent history of New Orleans public education and did not intensify in the aftermath of the hurricane. A year before Hurricane Katrina, for example, white students made up only four percent of Orleans Parish’s public school enrollment.

Almost three out of four of New Orleans’s 1,876 white students in 2008 attended “selective admission” schools operated or chartered by the Orleans Parish School Board. These schools selected students from those who applied based on prior test scores and/or other criteria of proven superior academic performance. Benjamin Franklin High School, for example, is the city’s oldest selective admission public school and arguably the highest performing high school in Louisiana. It is also nationally recognized as a top high school in America. As the school’s own literature states, Franklin High has “been trusted with the education of the best and brightest students in the New Orleans Public School system” since 1957.

Two new charter schools with selective admissions (Lusher Charter School and Audubon Charter School) were established after the hurricane by OPSB and educate a relatively large portion of the small number of white students attending public schools in the city. As a result, two-thirds of all white students enrolled in Orleans Parish public schools are in only three schools—and all three have selective admissions.

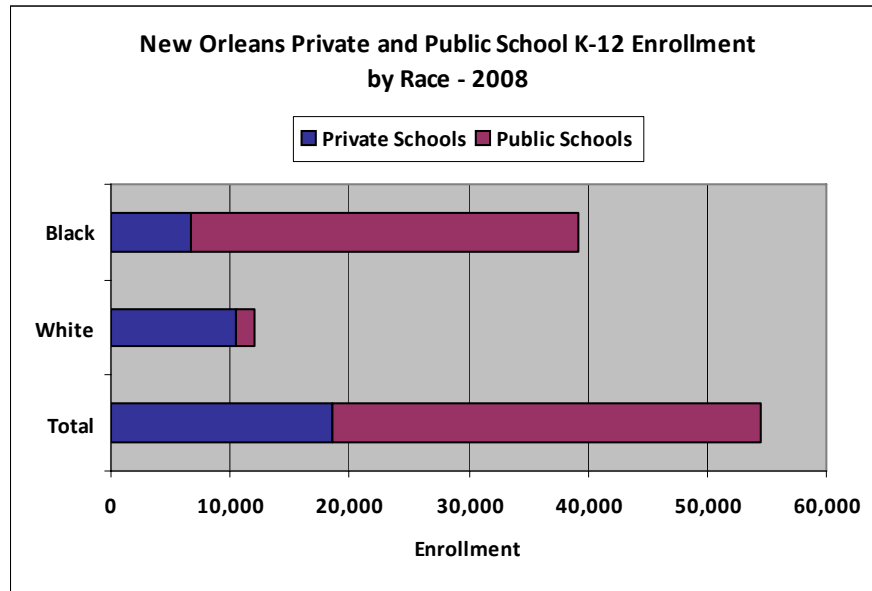
In addition, these three schools in 2008 were the only public schools in New Orleans with less than a majority of students eligible for free lunch, i.e., students living in a family at or below the poverty line. Twenty percent of the Franklin High School students were eligible for free lunches; 24 percent at Lusher; and 45 percent at Audubon.

Private Schools in New Orleans

Approximately 10,534 white students attended K-12 private schools in 2008 in New Orleans. There were 5.6 times more white pupils attending private schools than public schools. Most of the private schools in the parish are affiliated with churches, primarily the Catholic Church.

Private schooling in New Orleans has a long history that preceded the racial integration of local public schools (made famous by a Norman Rockwell portrait of little Ruby Bridges, standing waist-high between US marshals, proudly marching to school in front of a wall of racially-charged graffiti). Yet, from 1950 through 1980 (when most school integration occurred), the number of white students in the New Orleans public school declined from almost 40,000 to less than 5,000. Many white students transferred to Orleans Parish’s private schools or moved with their families to suburban parishes where they attended predominately white public schools.

African American students also attend private schools in New Orleans. In 2008, approximately 6,720 attended the parish’s private schools—37 percent of total private school enrollment. Before Hurricane Katrina, more than 11,700 black students were in private schools in Orleans, and they comprised 45 percent of the parish’s private school enrollment. In all likelihood, most of these African American students came from middle class families.



In 2008, about 85 percent of the white students and a little more than 17 percent of the African American students throughout New Orleans attended K-12 private schools. None of the private schools publish results from test scores.

Similar, if somewhat less pronounced, patterns of self-selection emerged among ethnic groups in 2008. Almost half (46 percent) of the 773 Asian children in Orleans Parish public schools were in selective admission school buildings operated by the local school board. One-fifth of the 809 Hispanic students also attended one of the city’s eight selective admission public schools.



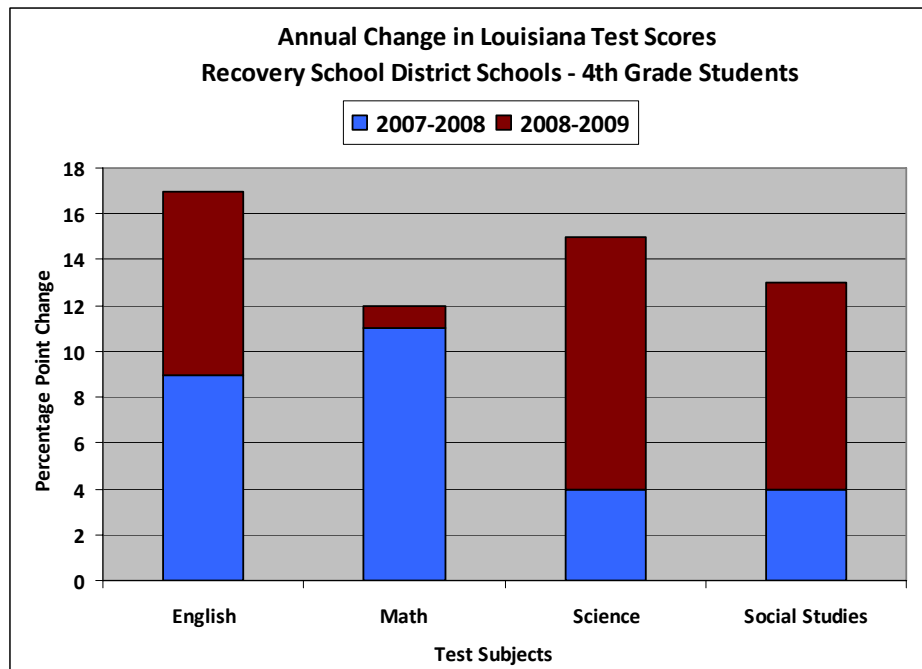
These enrollment trends do not alter the overall nature or demographics of the New Orleans public schools, since there are so few white, ethnic, and non-poor students throughout the systems. But, the patterns illuminate the potential segregating effects of allowing public schools—be they charter or otherwise—to self-select their own students. All of New Orleans’s selective admission public schools were established or authorized by the local, democratically elected school board. All state-run schools, including its charter schools, have open admissions.

Student Performance: Recent Improvements

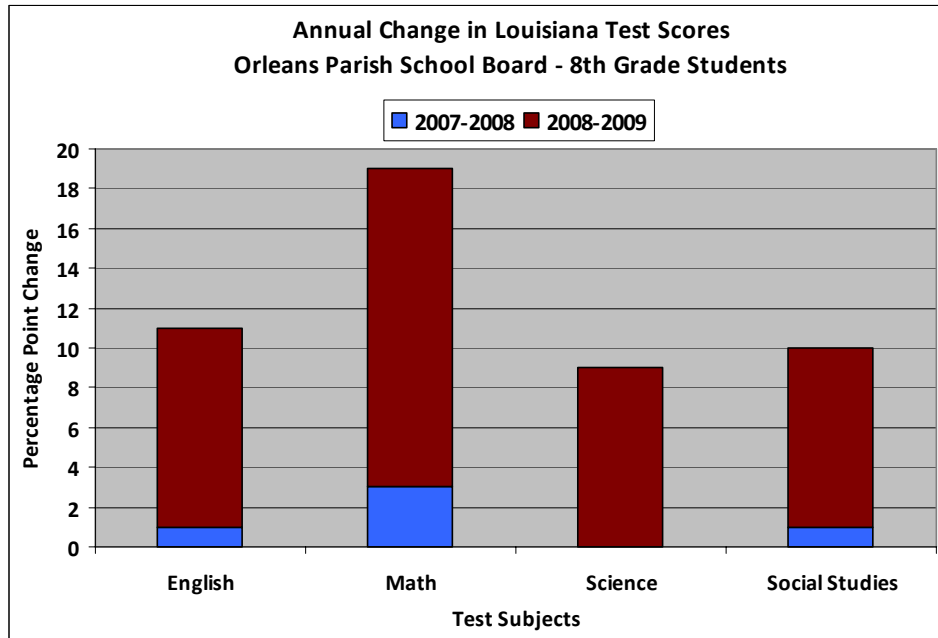
In the years since the 2005 hurricane, most public schoolchildren in New Orleans have made improvements in academic achievement and attainment at a consistently impressive rate. After a chaotic, dispiriting school year in 2007, the vast majority of New Orleans public schools raised their student performance from 2007 to 2008, as measured by the Louisiana Department of Education.⁷ All types of public school in Orleans Parish showed progress, and RSD schools—both the charter schools and traditional schools—achieved the largest gains, with an average improvement of about 13 points in overall school performance. Only about 30 of the more than 1,000 middle and elementary schools elsewhere across Louisiana had a higher a rate of yearly improvement from 2007 to 2008.

Test scores from the spring of 2009 confirm that most New Orleans students have continued to improve their academic performance.⁸ Most 4th and 8th grade

students in New Orleans schools improved test scores on a range of subjects for a second consecutive year and in most cases showed rates of improvement exceeding the state average. In language arts, for example, the proportion of 4th grade students scoring basic or above in RSD schools increased by 17 percentage points from 2007 to 2009, while on the state science tests, the proportion increased by 15 percentage points. In New Orleans’s OPSB schools, 4th grade students taking the same tests also made gains, ranging from 4 percentage points in social studies to 14 points in science.



Most 8th grade scores by New Orleans students also showed improvements. The largest gains from 2007 through 2009 were in language arts, where the percentage of RSD’s 8th graders scoring basic or above increased by 10 points. There were lesser gains in other subjects and a slight drop in scores in social studies. Similarly, the percentage of OPSB’s 8th grade students scoring basic or better increased in all subjects, especially in language arts (11 percentage points) and social studies (10 points).



In addition, students in New Orleans high schools over the last two years increased the rates by which 12th grade students passed the Louisiana exit exams and graduated.⁹ Not only did the city’s overall rate substantially improve, but also the percentage of 12th grade students graduating increased from 2007 through 2009 in all but three public high schools across the city.¹⁰

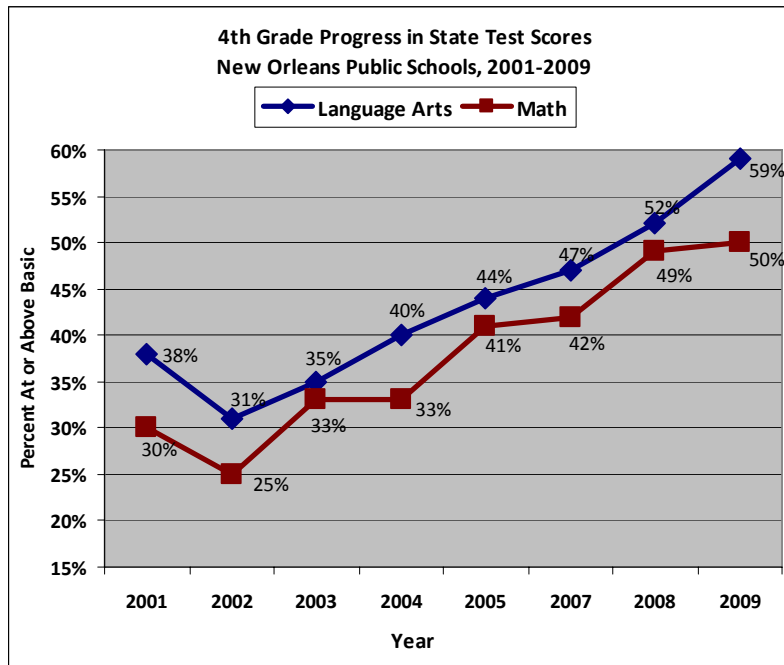
These improvements in academic performance varied from school to school, but the most important, remarkable fact is that most public schools in the Orleans Parish showed increases in student achievement and attainment regardless of the school’s demographic characteristics, type, or location.

Student Performance: Improving since Hurricane Katrina

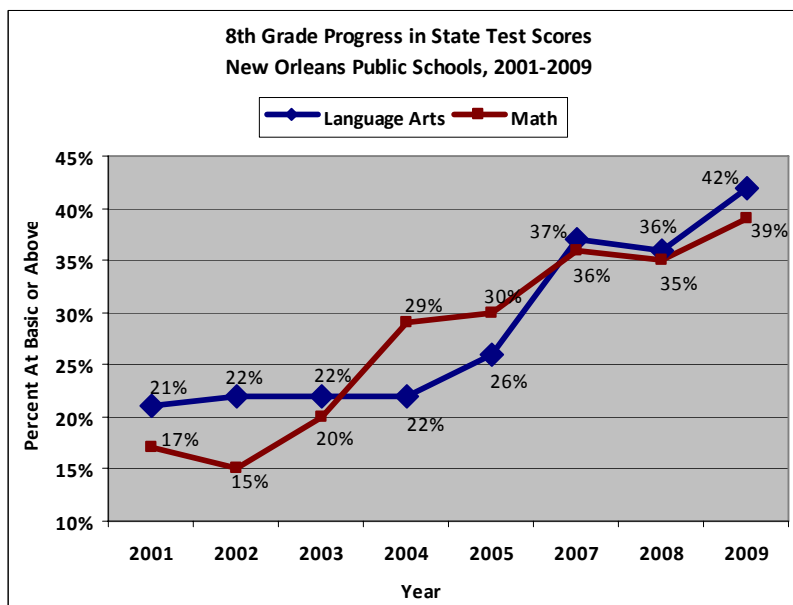
The recent gains in test scores indicate that public schoolchildren in New Orleans are now doing better than they were before Hurricane Katrina hit the city in August 2005. In pre-Katrina 2005, only 51 percent of 4th grade students in Orleans Parish passed the state’s promotional exams. By 2009, 63 percent passed.

This trend is also reflected in test scores by subject matter for both 4th and 8th grade students in New Orleans. In 2005, only 44 percent of 4th grade students scored basic or above in English language arts. The percentage rose in 2008 to 52 percent and to 59 percent in 2009. In mathematics, half of all New Orleans’s 4th grade students in

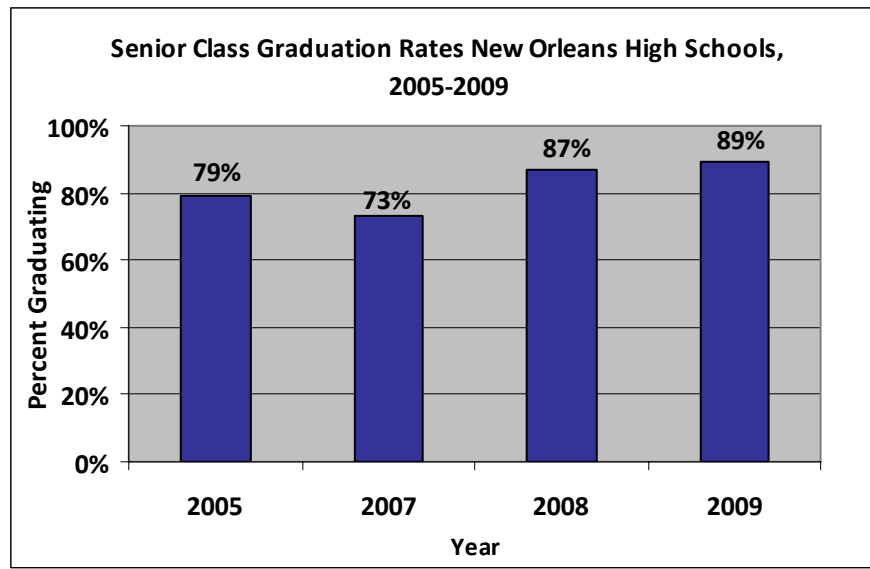
public schools scored at the state’s proficient level of basic or above in 2009, while in 2005 the number was only 41 percent.



The percentage of New Orleans public school students in the 8th grade who scored at the state’s goal of “basic or above” also increased beyond 2005 levels in 2008, and even more in 2009. Similarly, a significantly larger percentage of students scored basic or above on state tests for 10th and 11th grades in 2009 than in 2005, although 2008 scores were more mixed.

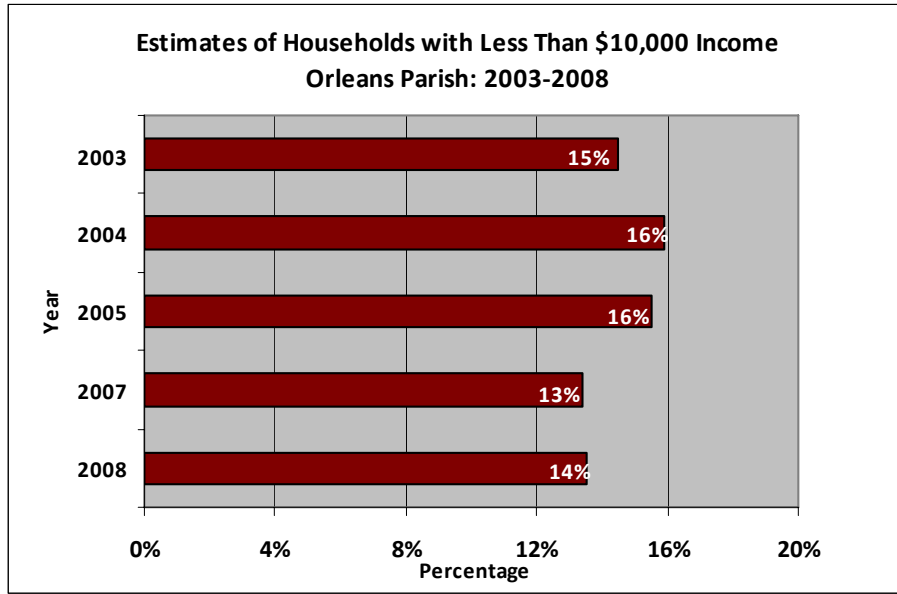


The same pattern is evident in a comparison of seniors' graduation rates. Before the hurricane in 2005, 79 percent of New Orleans's 12th grade students passed the state exit exam and graduated from high school. After the rate dropped to 73 percent in 2007, the percentage of graduating seniors in New Orleans high schools increased to 87 percent in 2008 and even higher in 2009.



Public schools in New Orleans in 2008 and 2009 had a smaller student population to educate than in 2004-05, but Orleans Parish public schools had been losing students at a rapid pace even before the hurricane.¹¹ The percentage of African American students in the public schools in October 2008 (90 percent) was comparable to the proportion in October 2004 (93 percent), and the percentage of students in families living in poverty (eligible to receive free lunches by federal standards) was, in fact, slightly higher in 2009 (79 percent) than in October 2004 (73 percent).

It is true that the numbers of extremely poor students in New Orleans may be slightly lower in the years since the hurricane. The estimated percentage of households in extreme poverty in Orleans Parish was slightly lower in 2008 (the last surveyed year) than in the years immediately prior to the hurricane, but the difference of two percentage points is not statistically significant and almost within the estimate's margins of error.¹²



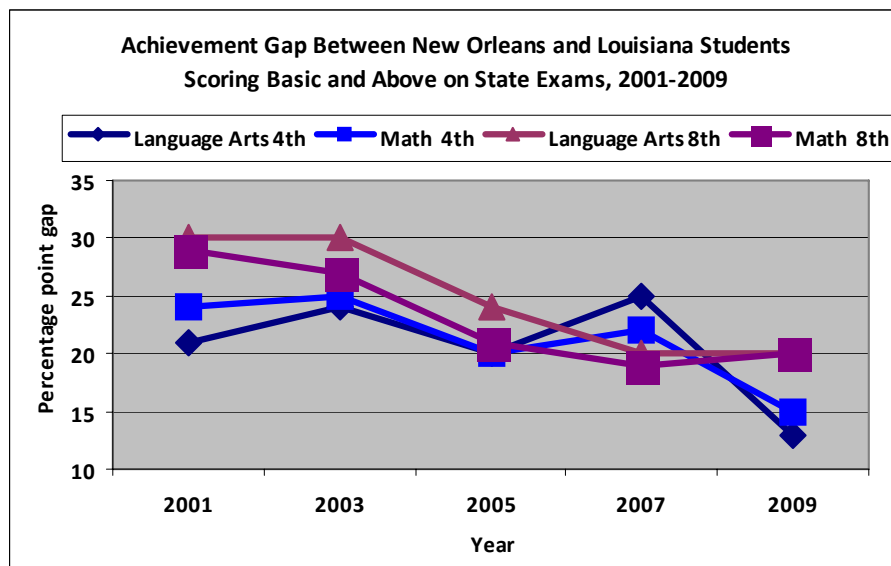
In addition, student improvements in state test scores did not begin in New Orleans public schools only after 2005. In fact, gains from 2002-2005 were substantial and established the foundation for post-hurricane improvements. The percentages of 4th and 8th grade students achieving basic or above in language arts and mathematics were higher in 2005 than in 2004 or in earlier years (see charts on p. 22). Although somewhat more uneven, rates of improvements in test scores over the four years before 2005 were similar to the rates of progress achieved during the four years following 2005.

The most striking, important difference in the public education systems before and after the hurricane is the simple fact that a vast majority of the schoolchildren who returned to New Orleans public schools after 2005 sustained an unprecedented period of dislocation, trauma, and personal loss in addition to large gaps in their schooling. These conditions ordinarily would create extraordinary obstacles and challenges for effective student learning.¹³ The city's returning students also have attended public schools that have provided comparatively minimal student services, generally inadequate health care (including student counseling and mental health services), and often less funding for instruction than the amounts provided to the average Louisiana and American student.¹⁴

New Orleans Students Closing Achievement Gap with Louisiana Students

As they did before 2005, New Orleans public school children continued in 2008 and 2009 to score below the Louisiana average on state-mandated tests. In 2009, 59 percent of 4th grade students in New Orleans public schools scored at or above basic in English language arts, but 69 percent of Louisiana students scored as well. This gap reflects substantial differences in student demographics. New Orleans public schools have a much larger percentage of students in families in poverty than the state has as a whole.

Despite this problem, New Orleans students are now moving decisively to close this achievement gap with the state, especially in 4th grade scores. For example, the gap in 4th grade language arts has dropped from 25 percentage points in 2007 to 13 points in 2009. In fact, during the last 8 years, the New Orleans achievement gap with the state has dropped almost 10 percentage points in language arts and math for both grades.



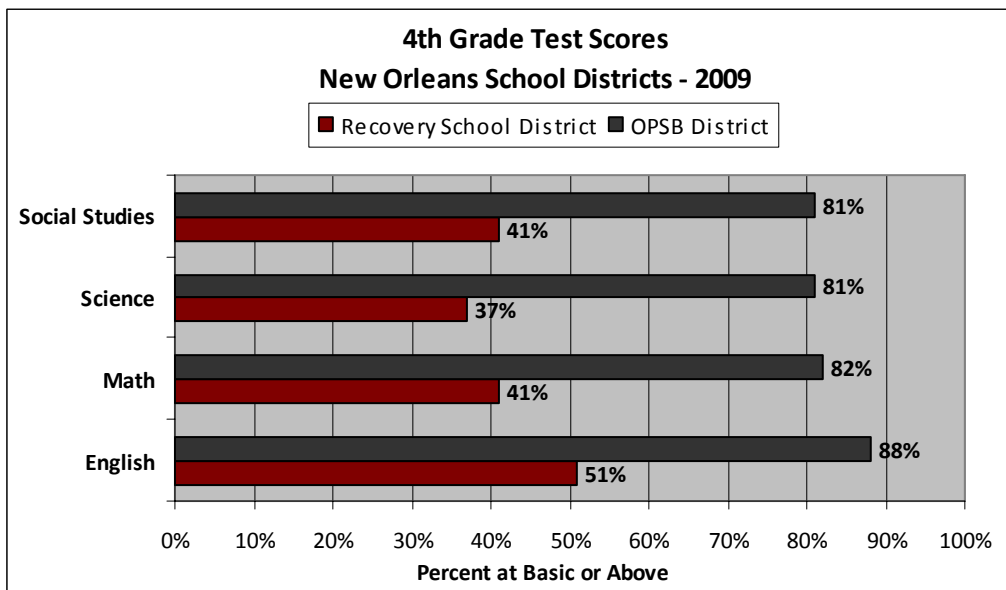
All things considered, it is reasonable to assume that the remarkable academic achievement gains of New Orleans public school students during each of the last two consecutive years have been built on improvements that began before Hurricane Katrina. Taken together, these gains are a very impressive track record of progress for New Orleans students amid incredibly difficult circumstances. For example, the percentage of 4th grade students in New Orleans scoring basic or above in state tests for language arts and mathematics has doubled since 2002. Also, the percentage of 8th grade students in New Orleans scoring basic or above in mathematics has nearly tripled, while it has almost doubled in language arts since 2002. New Orleans schools have been able to make a remarkable accomplishment that promises sustained, long-term student

learning if the city’s schools can afford to support necessary improvements in school facilities and student learning.

Student Performance: Huge Learning Gaps

Despite recent overall gains, student test scores exhibit vast gaps in current academic performance between students in different New Orleans public schools. These differences illuminate the profound influence of race and family poverty in education and the role of selective admission schools in sorting students in New Orleans. They constitute one of the city’s primary challenges in accelerating over time the momentum for improved student learning.

OPSB schools have out-performed the Recovery schools by a wide margin from the early grades through high school. In 4th grade tests in 2009, for instance, the percentage of students scoring basic or above in OPSB schools was often double the percentage of high-achieving students in every subject. The gap in test scores was even larger among 8th grade students and largest among high school students.¹⁵

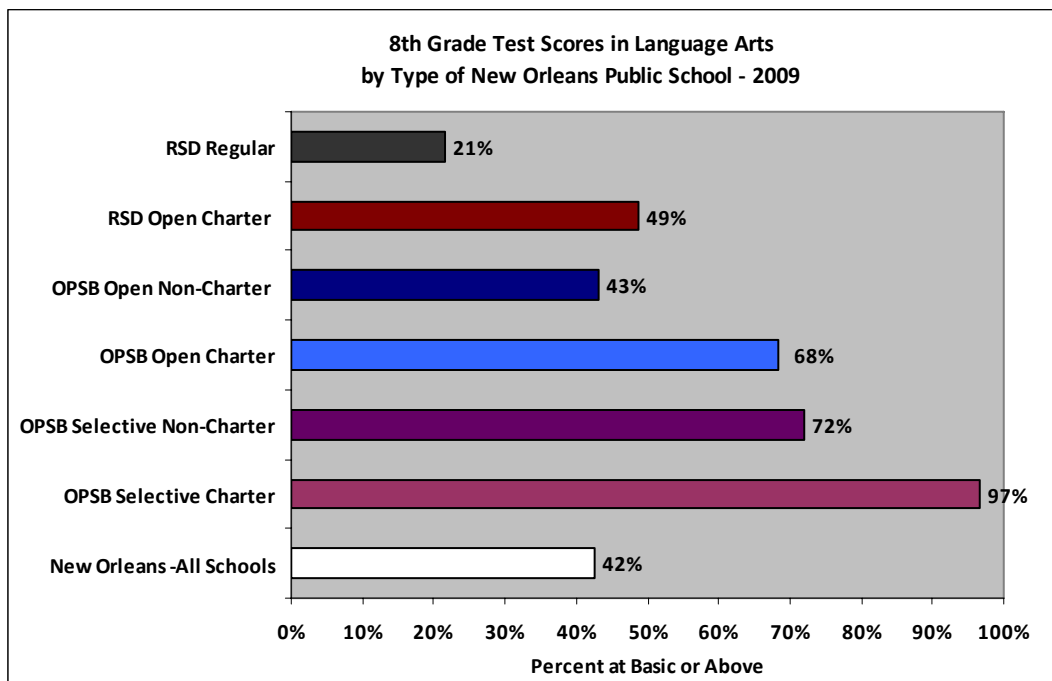


A few RSD schools (especially elementary schools) matched or exceeded test scores in the OPSB schools. For instance, the Martin Luther King Charter Elementary School in the Recovery School District virtually matched or out-performed all OPSB elementary schools, including the selective admission schools, in 4th grade scores for all

subjects in 2009. But, the trend line clearly shows a vast gap in achievement levels between RSD and OPSB schools.

These differences are explained in large part by the simple fact that OPSB admitted two-thirds of its students into selective admission schools only after they demonstrated high levels of academic performance. In other words, most students in OPSB schools were admitted because they were already proven high-achievers—not because OPSB schools helped to create high-achievers.

This factor is also evident in a comparison of state test scores by type of school. The highest percentages of 8th grade students scoring basic or above in language arts in 2009 in New Orleans were in the selective admission schools—both charter (97 percent) and non-charter (72 percent). The lowest percentages were in RSD regular schools (21 percent), OPSB regular schools (43 percent), and RSD open admission charter schools (49 percent).

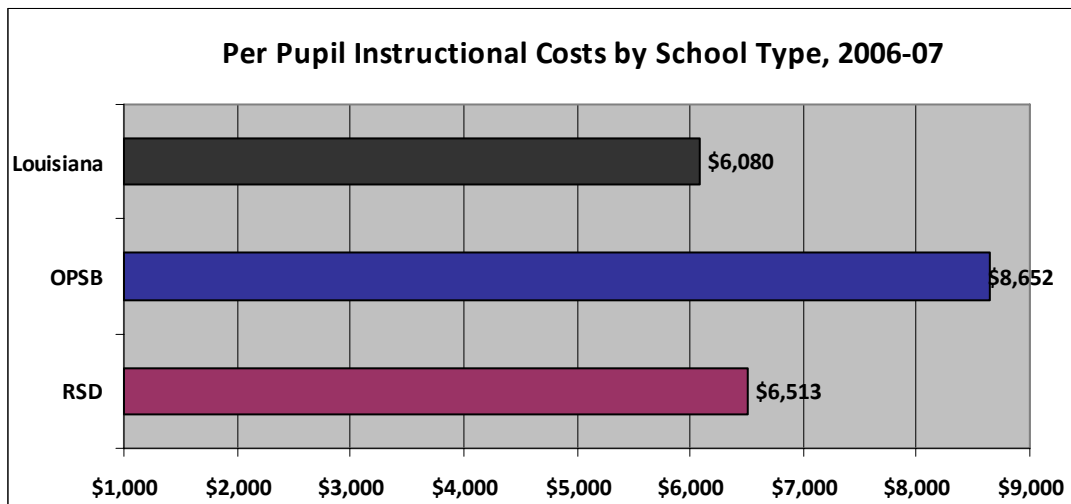


These achievement gaps also reflect differences in student demographics. Ninety-seven percent of the OPSB selective admission charter schools scored basic or above on their English tests—by far the city’s highest academic performance among the various groupings of public schools. These OPSB schools also have the lowest percentage of students eligible for free lunches (43 percent)—less than half the average

for the Recovery District’s schools. They also have a considerably smaller percentage of African American students.

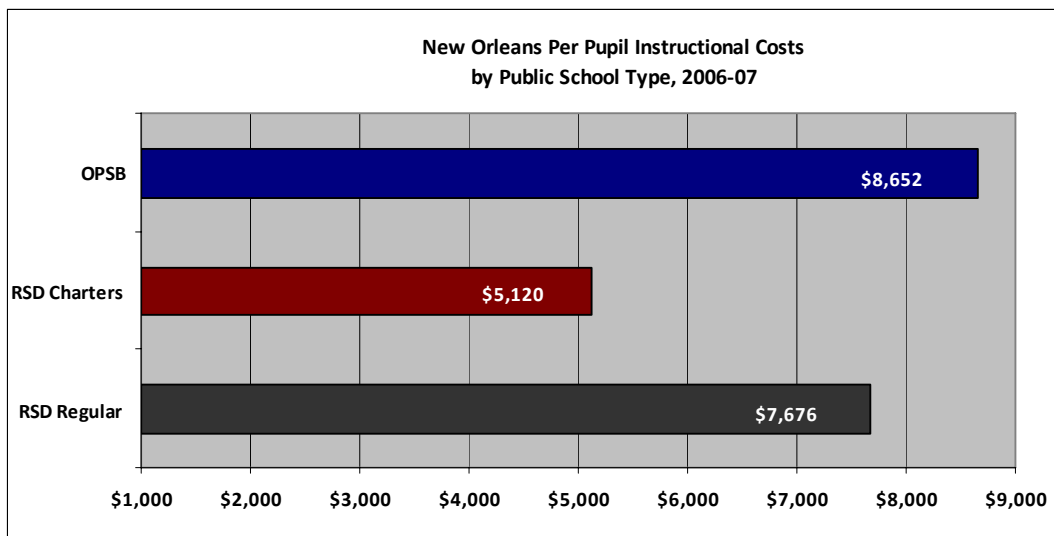
Educational Resources for Student Performance

Both Recovery School District and OPSB schools invested more funds per pupil on instruction than did the average Louisiana school in 2006-07 (the first full school year after the hurricane and the most recent year for data on expenditures by New Orleans public schools). While the average costs for classroom instruction were nearly equal in the Recovery School District and in the state, the RSD spent more per pupil for student support services, as well as for teacher training and other instructional staff services. In all likelihood, the higher instructional costs for the OPSB district were related primarily to the district’s higher salaries, better benefits, and more experienced corps of teachers and administrators.



There were differences in per pupil instructional costs between types of schools in New Orleans in 2006-07. The RSD charter schools as a group spent the least amount for instruction (\$5,120), while OPSB public schools spent the most (\$8,652)—a total of \$3,532 more per pupil than RSD charter schools. Without more recent, comparable data, it is unclear if this widely divergent pattern of funding for instruction and student support has continued in the last couple of years.¹⁶ This much is evident: in the first year of renewed operations, New Orleans public schools generally spent a good deal more

for student instruction in schools with the city’s lowest rates of poverty and minority students—schools where students also scored highest on a variety of tests.



The higher-poverty, lower-performing schools also probably had the least experienced teachers in 2007 when a majority of the New Orleans public school teachers had 5 years or less of experience in the classroom and one-fourth of all teachers were in their first year of teaching.¹⁷ In RSD schools, both charter and non-charter, 47 percent of all teachers were entering the classroom for the first time in 2007.

According to a study by Tulane University’s Cowen Institute, 60 percent of the teachers in the RSD non-charter schools were first-time teachers, while OPSB schools had the highest percentage of experienced teachers.¹⁸ 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.

In 2007, OPSB schools also had a higher average teacher salary than did RSD schools, especially RSD charter schools. According to data from the Louisiana Department of Education, this pattern may no longer apply. Regular RSD and most RSD charter schools in 2008 increased their budgeted teacher pay to levels comparable to the average paid of OPSB teachers.

Community and Parent Involvement

By all accounts, New Orleans residents are currently more engaged in the city's public schools and its broader community life than they were before the hurricane. After conducting a series of interviews and focus groups during 2008, the Cowen Institute concluded that "community involvement has increased in public schools but parental involvement remains low."¹⁹ This conclusion is illustrated, on the one hand, by the recent growth of a large number of local groups and organizations focused on public schools and student learning in the city and on the other, by the fact that only a very small proportion of these groups are involved primarily in supporting parental involvement. A group like Save Our Schools, which works directly to engage parents in the schools, is the exception.

The need for parental involvement in New Orleans schools is self-evident but cannot be addressed simply through traditional school-based parent centers or parent-teacher organizations. In a community with the nation's largest options for public choice, parents and students have to make defining decisions about which school to attend, how to apply, and when to apply far in advance of the first day of school. In addition, in a city with different systems of schools, parents must have easily useable information by which to understand and evaluate how various schools may fit the needs of their children.

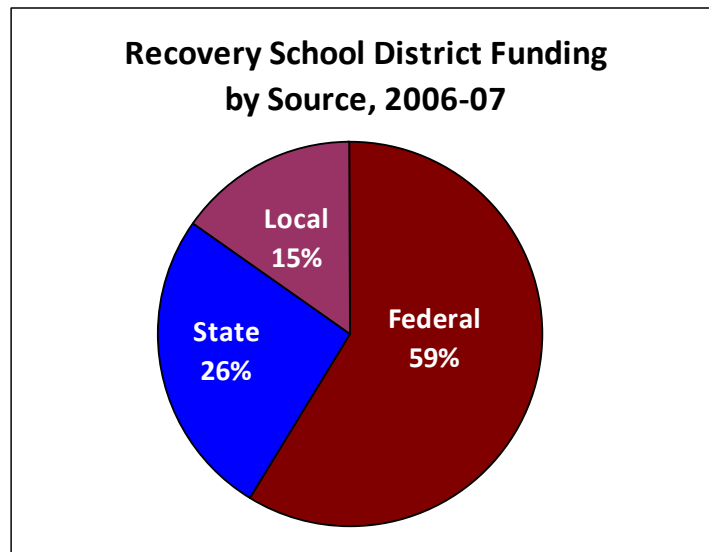
The challenges that low income parents face in New Orleans today in negotiating the various educational systems amid the other demands of daily life are formidable. These parents (who constitute as much as 80 percent of New Orleans's public school parents) have not had real opportunities of choice in selecting the best public school for their own children because support for parental involvement has not moved very far beyond public meetings, the publication of brochures and booklets, and online materials about New Orleans schools. Many have not had access to computer-based materials; many have not been able to attend day or night meetings; and many have not had options for transporting their children to more distant schools of their choice. These and other New Orleans parents need far more direct assistance and contact throughout the

year if the city's different systems of schools are to succeed in having significant, material benefits of parental involvement for improvement of student learning.

Recent Federal Role in New Orleans K-12 Education

Since September 2006, when students began returning to K-12 schools in New Orleans, the federal government has played a vital but severely limited role in supporting the re-establishment of the city's public education. Federal funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) constituted a majority of all Recovery School District funding in 2006-07 and were indispensable in restarting the city's public schools.

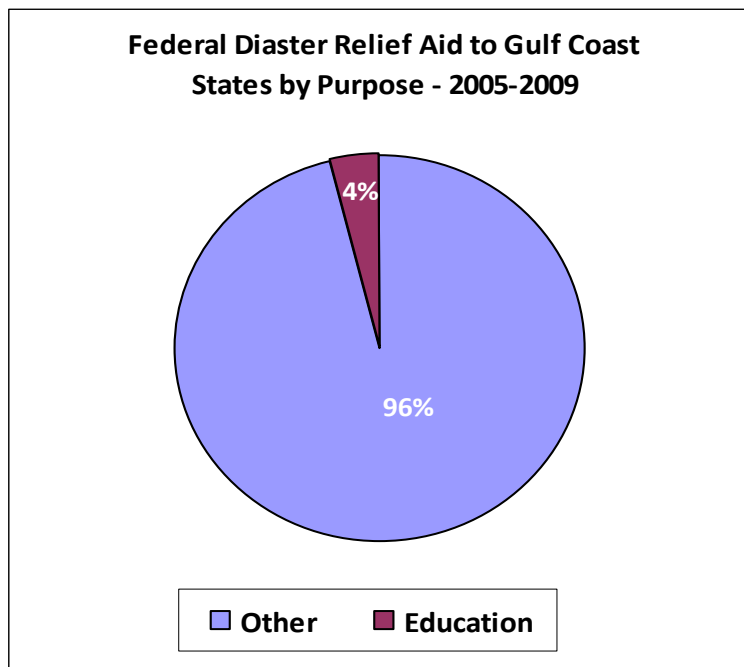
Federal funds also have been essential to the RSD as it has continued to renovate, rebuild, and furnish schools as the number of public schoolchildren in the city has increased yearly. FEMA funding in 2008 enabled the opening of Langston Hughes Academy Charter School in August 2009 as New Orleans's first newly constructed school since the hurricane. As schools reopened in 2009, FEMA announced it had made \$165 million in federal commitments to continue repairs and renovations in RSD schools.



Despite these efforts, federal commitments to New Orleans schools remain long-delayed and grossly insufficient for restoring the city's infrastructure of public education. It has been more than four years since Hurricane Katrina, and FEMA is still haggling with local school officials as to whether a large number of school buildings suffered more than 50 percent damage, while almost 40 school buildings sit empty and

unusable. In addition, the city's master plan for reconstructing school facilities has estimated costs of approximately \$1.6 billion, but there is no source of future revenue to cover as much as half that cost. And there are no federal commitments to help.

Apart from special funding for supporting the startup of some of the city's charter schools, the federal commitment to restore student learning in the K-12 buildings in New Orleans has been comparatively negligible. Federal funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for New Orleans was also comparatively small, since the Act distributed funding nationally more on the basis of school enrollment than of school needs.



During the last two years, FEMA has actually allocated federal funds to local school districts through legislation and commitments made in 2005 and 2006. This change is the most important difference that has occurred in the federal role in restoring public education in New Orleans. But, there has been no new substantial commitment of federal support for New Orleans to restore and improve public education. The amount of federal assistance for education remains in 2009 as little as 4 percent of the total disaster aid provided to the Gulf Coast. In short, the federal role has been vital but remains inadequate.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Public schoolchildren in New Orleans have emerged from the one of the nation's worst disasters as a special example of the incredible capacity of American students for renewal even in the face of hardship and insufficient help. These children returned to New Orleans with their families and have done more than persevere. They have progressed in school under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Their schools have not always been the best, but with the help of a number of caring adults, New Orleans students have demonstrated both youthful resilience and determination.

New Orleans public schools are struggling to find success. They constitute an important experiment in urban education. During the last two years, public schools and schoolchildren in New Orleans have made exceptional progress in student learning, building on progress made before Hurricane Katrina. It is a signal accomplishment and doubly impressive for the fact that it continued in the aftermath of unprecedented dislocation and trauma. If the progress that New Orleans schoolchildren have made since 2002 can continue, they will close the achievement gap with the state's other students within the next few years.

There is little widespread agreement in New Orleans as to exactly which specific reforms and changes in schooling have been responsible for recent educational progress. It is too early for anyone to identify reliably and understand precisely the essential elements of school success in New Orleans.

What is indisputable is that the city's progress in restoring and improving public education, whether measured since 2001 or 2005, will be unsustainable for most students during the lifetime of their K-12 education unless the federal government makes a larger investment over time in fulfilling its responsibility to help in rebuild, restore, and improve New Orleans schools.

New Orleans is in danger of destroying its own progress over time by ignoring the segregating effects of allowing individual public schools—be they charter or otherwise—to self-select their own students in ways that, in effect, separate students into different schools primarily on the basis of academic achievement, which primarily translates to race and income. If individual public schools can self-select their students,

New Orleans schools will not succeed in the long run, regardless of available resources, and the city will waste its opportunity to re-discover effective public education. The history of Southern education makes clear that such practices of school choice have almost always left the neediest, poorest students in the lowest performing schools. It is particularly unfortunate that New Orleans's local, democratically elected school board has been principally responsible for maintaining the policies and schools that perpetuate this condition in the city's schools.

In addition, it is clear that diverse systems of public education will not succeed in New Orleans over time if the schools do not provide greater direct support to parents with children in poverty to navigate and understand the options and choices among schools. Providing adequate transportation within the city for children to attend the schools of their choice will also be key to their continued progress.

The role and responsibilities of the federal government in New Orleans K-12 public education remain unfinished four years after Katrina. Without delay, the federal government should help the New Orleans public schools finance the re-building and renovation of all public schools over the next several years and assist the schools (or another local authority) in providing adequate transportation and support for low income students and their parents. It also should assure that all students have a comparable, fair opportunity to learn. In this way, the federal government can fulfill its responsibilities to a city still struggling under the weight of enormous problems caused by Hurricane Katrina.

New Orleans is a city in the messy, partial process of renewal. Its public schools represent the primary wellspring of talent and innovation for the city's rebirth and progress. It is time to help the children of New Orleans build a future for their city and themselves through education. Four years after Katrina, it is time for the federal government to do what it should have done years earlier. It is time to fully restore the infrastructure of public education in New Orleans so that the city's students, parents, teachers, and community members can continue to find within themselves the best ways to accelerate and sustain the progress that schools and students have made so far against the odds.

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Endnotes

¹ [No Time to Lose: Why America Needs an Education Amendment to the US Constitution to Improve Public Education](#) (2009) pp. 11-12. [A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South's Public Schools](#) (2007), pp. 8-9, 14-15.

² Specific issues remain in dispute surrounding the adequacy of the design and maintenance of the levees and the recovery efforts after Katrina, but the failures of the US Army Corps of Engineers in maintaining the Mississippi River's waterways and levees around New Orleans and the mistakes of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in responding effectively to the disaster were self-evident to the American people and are now well-documented. See especially: "Investigation of the Performance of New Orleans Flood Protection System in Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005; "Performance Evaluation of the New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana Hurricane Protection System: Final Report of the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force"; "A Failure of Initiative: The Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina." An accessible overview is found in "The Threatening Storm," *Time*, August 1, 2007.

³ For full details, see [Education After Katrina: Time for a New Federal Response](#) (2007).

⁴ While the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) is a county unit of government, its jurisdiction encompasses all of the City of New Orleans and its public schools. Therefore, this report uses interchangeable references to Orleans Parish public schools and New Orleans public schools. The combination of state-controlled schools in New Orleans and the Orleans Parish schools constitute the Orleans public schools after 2005.

⁵ Louisiana Act #9, 2003 Regular Session; Louisiana Act #463, 2008 Regular Session.

⁶ The charter schools were created by a non-profit organization led by a board of directors of educators, community leaders, and /or parents in order to operate more independently than ordinary public schools. The schools are granted a charter to make many decisions concerning budget allocation, staffing, and curriculum that in more traditional public schools often are dictated by or involve the central office of the school district. Charter schools are controversial especially since they often break with the tradition of using seniority—the number of years as a teachers—as the primary basis for determining the privileges and pay of teaching.

⁷ The Louisiana Department of Education computes a school score by assessing state test scores, drop-out rates, and student attendance in each school. For a good explanation of the formula, see the Cowen Institute's 2008 supplemental report, "Public School Performance in New Orleans," p.10.

⁸ Computed school performance scores for 2009 will be issued in late 2009 or early 2010.

⁹ It is not possible to measure the 4-year graduation rates of freshmen in New Orleans high school since there has not been enough time since the schools re-opened after the hurricanes for them to complete their high school years. Hence, the percentage of 12th grade students graduating each year is used as an interim measurement.

¹⁰ The lowered rates among the three high schools where 12th grade graduation rates declined were 82 percent, 91 percent, and 97 percent—two higher than the city's average rate

¹¹ If the rate of decline in the student population from 2000-2004 had continued from 2005 through 2009, the difference in the "normal" and post-Hurricane population for New Orleans public schools would have been approximately 21,000 students. See Web Extras in the section of "New Orleans Schools Four Years after Katrina" at www.southerneducation.org.

¹² The margin of error for these U.S. Census estimate have a plus or minus range of 1.1 to 1.7 percentage points. In addition, it is not necessarily accurate to assume that any small increase in households with less than \$10,000 income included an increase in school-age children.

¹³ See for example Scott J. South, Dana L. Haynie, and Sunita Bose, "Student Mobility and School Dropout," *Social Science Research* 36 (2007) 68-94, where researchers state: "Our analysis has focused on the shorter-term effects of mobility, but it possible that some of the negative impact of moving might occur several years after the move" (92). Russell W. Rumberger and Katherine A Larson, "Student Mobility and Increased Risk of High school Dropouts," *American Journal of Education*, 107 (November 1998), 1-35.

¹⁴ See Kaiser Family Foundation. *New Orleans Three Years After The Storm: The Second Kaiser Post-Katrina Survey, 2008; Education after Katrina*.

¹⁵ For charts comparing 8th grade scores and high school scores, see the “Web Extras” in the New Orleans Schools *Four Years After Katrina* section at www.southerneducation.org.

¹⁶ A report by the Cowen Institute examined the public school budgets adopted for 2008-09 and found that a similar amount had been allocated as the foundation for funding each type of public school’s expenses.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, there are no quantitative measures for identifying and comparing *effective teaching* across schools or school systems. As a result, instructional experience, teachers’ educational levels, and levels of pay are often used as measures in a school district to identify the possibility of “highly qualified” teachers who are presumably more capable of effective teaching.

¹⁸ 2008 Report, Scott Cowen Institute, pp. 26-27.

¹⁹ 2008 Report, Cowen Institute, pp.40-41.