

Great Expectations in New Orleans

“I don’t think that would work too well here; we’re pretty unique.”

Authorizers around the country have said this since the first authorizing shop opened in Minnesota in 1992. Sometimes, the concern is well-founded. Not every problem requires an identical solution.

But as the charter school sector expands and matures, our knowledge of what’s needed and what works grows more robust. Certain patterns have emerged and NACSA is paying close attention to them.

This case study is one in a series that explores local progress on charter school authorizing in various corners of our country. We’ll dig into what was needed, how it happened, and why it matters to the ultimate quest we’re all on: creating and sustaining great public schools for all U.S. children.

The series continues on our nation’s Southern coast, in New Orleans, a city remaking itself with perseverance and ingenuity since the devastating Hurricane Katrina and subsequent flooding in 2005. This unprecedented disaster has resulted in an unprecedented revival. No other school district nationwide has attempted charter schools on this scale. We look to New Orleans for lessons and enlightenment.

The Goal: To provide high-quality educational options for New Orleans’s children through the establishment of model charter school authorizing practices, starting with a high-quality application evaluation process.

The Result: Today, New Orleans public schools—most of which are charters—are greatly improved: academic performance is better, graduation rates are up, and parent satisfaction is higher. Students now have the opportunity to flourish in great schools, with bright futures.



The average school performance score has risen by

41%
since 2004-05.

65%
5.7%



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of students attend a failing public school, down from **65%** in 2008.



The senior dropout rate at non-selective high schools has been cut by **more than half** since 2005.



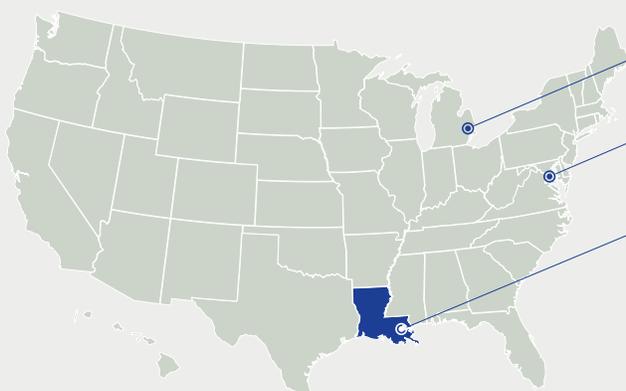
High school graduation rates have increased by **25 percentage points** since 2004. According to 2012 cohort graduation rates, **nearly 78 percent** of New Orleans seniors graduated on time.



More than 2,500 public high school students graduated in spring 2014.

Students were accepted to over **345 colleges**, earning more than **\$53 million in scholarships**.

New Orleans has the greatest percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools in the nation:



DETROIT
51%

WASHINGTON, D.C.
43%

NEW ORLEANS
91%

There are **117** charter schools in Louisiana, the majority in New Orleans.



In 2014, the RSD became the first **all-charter district in the nation**.

Sources: Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives; Educate Now!; Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools; Orleans Parish School Board; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools; Recovery School District



Essential Facts

- 1 Under Louisiana's 1995 charter school law**, just five of New Orleans's 128 public schools were charter schools prior to 2005.
- 2 In 2003, the state created the Recovery School District (RSD)** to oversee chronically low-performing schools. By the beginning of the 2004-05 school year (one year before Hurricane Katrina), the Louisiana Department of Education took over jurisdiction of five schools in New Orleans, placing them under RSD.
- 3 In 2005, massive Hurricane Katrina hit the city**, followed by the breaching of its levees and extensive flooding across 80 percent of the city.
- 4 The state legislature vowed not to re-establish** the failed New Orleans school system. They passed Act 35, which established Orleans Parish as a district in crisis and allowed the takeover of any school performing below state averages, placing those schools under RSD.
- 5 Hurricane Katrina catalyzed the state** to rebuild the school system using charters. State board leadership asked for assistance to build their capacity and expertise. Like many others, NACSA offered to help.
- 6 In 2006, NACSA, under contract with the Louisiana Department of Education**, overhauled the charter application evaluation criteria and process, adding features such as non-Department evaluators and applicant interviews.
- 7 NACSA led the development of** the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's (BESE) first charter contract and first set of performance standards, both within the first year of the rebuilding effort.
- 8 NACSA was asked to manage** 12 post-Katrina charter application cycles during seven years, through the end of 2012.
- 9 Between 2006 and 2012**, NACSA conducted independent reviews of every proposal, managing a team of skilled national and local external experts in the review of more than 250 charter school applications over seven years.
- 10 Currently 74 charter schools operate in New Orleans.** Using their new rigorous accountability system, BESE has closed 13 low-performing schools in the city.
- 11 The typical New Orleans charter school student gains**, on average, an additional four months of learning per year in reading and an additional five months in math compared to their district school counterparts. At the school level, 50 percent of New Orleans charter schools have significantly better learning gains in reading than their district school peers and 62 percent of charters outperform in math gains.



Welcome to New Orleans



New Orleans Charter School Sector Snapshot

2

authorizers:

Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (**BESE**)

Orleans Parish School Board (**OPSB**)



91%

of New Orleans public school students are in charters
(greatest percentage of all U.S. cities)

New Orleans's schools and students have made significant gains in recent years. Here's a handful of stunning statistics:

- The average school performance score has risen by 41 percent since 2004-05.¹
- Only 5.7 percent of students attend a failing public school, down from 65 percent in 2008.²
- The senior dropout rate at non-selective high schools has been cut by more than half since 2005.³
- High school graduation rates have increased by 25 percentage points since 2004. According to 2012 cohort graduation rates, nearly 78 percent of New Orleans seniors graduated on time.⁴
- More than 2,500 public high school students graduated in spring 2014; students were accepted to over 345 colleges, earning more than \$53 million in scholarships, according to the city's two systems, the Recovery School District (RSD) and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB).⁵

These numbers cause immediate delight, as any good news does. We intrinsically know that any community's future rests on its youth and their ability to successfully move into adulthood. So good news about New Orleans students is good news for the city and for our country.

But, being New Orleans, these numbers mean more. Our nation watched in distress as the city was slammed by a massive storm and then slammed again by bursting levees. Some sent prayers; others sent money or supplies. Some showed up to help temporarily; some stayed permanently. Innumerable documentaries, books, and works of art describe the event and how it forever changed this incomparable city. New Orleans residents and their families and friends can tell the most personal versions of that history—they lived it.

NACSA cannot publish a case study on New Orleans authorizing without recognizing this defining moment, as that context is an inseparable part of what has happened since then to redefine the city's public school system.

1 Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives:

<http://www.coweninstitute.com/our-work/applied-research/nola-by-the-numbers/nbtn-february-2014>

2 Recovery School District: http://www.rsdl.net/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=310107&id=0

3 Educate Now!: <http://educatenow.net/2013/10/16/revisionist-history/>

4 Recovery School District: http://www.rsdl.net/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=310107&id=0

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The New Orleans Model: Rare but Replicable

While some recoil at the depiction of this tragedy as an opportunity, many see it as both. Scott Cowen, president emeritus of Tulane University in New Orleans, describes this in his recently released book⁶: “One way to look at Katrina is that the storm created a clean slate for the radical reinvention of the schools... A crisis (to repeat a theme of this book) is also, crucially, an opportunity.”

In the scramble to get schools up and running at a superhuman pace, the best way soon became apparent: federal dollars and charter schools. The influx of resources was dramatic. Now, nearly a decade later, New Orleans children live in a city that is rewriting its future. Many of them attend schools birthed in the wake of the storm—the schools that have become part of the city’s nearly all-charter public school system. These numbers are striking, as well:

- New Orleans has the greatest percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools in the nation—91 percent⁷—followed by Detroit (51 percent) and Washington, D.C. (43 percent).⁸
- There are 117 charter schools in Louisiana, with the majority of those in New Orleans.⁹
- With the closure of its remaining five traditional schools in 2014, the RSD became the first all-charter district in the nation.

With such dramatic data, some might dismiss the story of New Orleans’s turnaround as impossible to replicate, but many education leaders disagree. Although a combination of rare circumstances set the stage for transformation in New Orleans, the activities that effected that transformation are replicable. The New Orleans model of reform applies to all states because all states have districts with chronically failing schools. In addition, many large urban districts are currently increasing their charter share of the market. Thus, all can learn from New Orleans’s victories and missteps and their example of perseverance and ingenuity in creating a better public school system for every student.

Changes Needed

In 2003, the state created the Recovery School District (RSD) to oversee chronically low-performing schools. By the beginning of the 2004-05 school year (one year before Hurricane Katrina), the Louisiana Department of Education took over jurisdiction of five schools in New Orleans, placing them under RSD.

Those five schools were the worst in a public school system racked by failure. Many New Orleans children languished in schools that were falling apart—many schools were more than 50 years old, with some more than 100. Fraud and academic failure were rampant, with multiple indictments against school employees, millions in unaccounted-for federal funds, and a dismal 74 percent of eighth graders not proficient in English and 70 percent not proficient in math.

6 *The Inevitable City: The Resurgence of New Orleans and the Future of Urban America*

By Scott Cowen, Betsy Seifter (Palgrave Macmillan, June 2014)

7 Educate Now!/Louisiana Department of Education: <http://educatenow.net/2013/12/29/new-orleans-is-over-90-charter/>

8 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools: <http://www.publiccharters.org/publications/growing-movement-americas-largest-charter-school-communities-8th-edition>

9 Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools: <http://lacharterschools.org/charter-schools/faqs>

Well before the storm, Sarah Usdin, founder and former director of New Schools for New Orleans, traveled to Indianapolis with a group of civic leaders. Their aim? To learn about best practices being used to grow quality charter schools. “Local leaders told us if we wanted to do anything right in New Orleans, we would need to be very thoughtful and diligent about our authorizing,” Usdin explains. “They said, ‘You have to make sure you’re going to let only great schools out of the gate.’ So our first lesson actually happened pre-Katrina.”

In August 2005, the massive hurricane hit the city, followed immediately by the breaching of its crumbling levees and extensive flooding across 80 percent of the city. Desperate times provoked drastic measures. The state legislature vowed not to re-establish the failed New Orleans school system. They passed Act 35, which established Orleans Parish as a district in crisis and allowed the takeover of any school performing below state averages, placing those schools under RSD.



“Authorizing is largely a function to maintain a high standard. That’s what a good approval process has done for New Orleans. Only schools recommended by NACSA and the Department were even brought to BESE for consideration.”

Sarah Usdin, Founder and former CEO, New Schools for New Orleans

Disaster Recovery: Groceries, Schools

According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, 237,000 people left the state due to the storm (100,000 have since returned), with 105,000 Louisiana students attending school temporarily in other states. Schools gradually started to reopen, struggling to meet the rate of returning families, which was faster than expected. Some reopened as RSD charters and some as RSD direct-run schools (with a handful still in the local district—see Cowen Institute’s graphic for current distribution). “There was a chance to see which model worked better as a way to run schools,” recalls Greg Richmond, president and CEO of NACSA. “Both had struggles, but the charter model produced better schools, by all measures,” he says.

“The charter model dispersed decisions and empowered each school to figure out what worked best,” Richmond explains. “In contrast, in the centrally controlled system of schools, highly complicated decisions were in the hands of very few—and very overwhelmed—people, and those schools had to sit and wait.” That’s why, he says, that while it was never an expectation that all city schools would be charters, today almost all are, because leaders observed the strikingly better results for students.

But in those early days after the storm, New Orleanians were focused on the essentials of survival. Usdin invokes the extreme situation facing the city post-Katrina. “People have to remember that grocery stores were not open more than a couple of hours a day. RSD was more about disaster recovery at that point: they had to focus on simply getting buildings cleared by the fire marshal so schools could open. Who could even fathom a lunch program, professional development, or transportation arrangements?”

Changes Made

City and state stakeholders, consulting with national experts and funders, hustled to craft a new architecture to manage New Orleans’s public schools as they were rebuilt, rehabbed, and reopened. The Louisiana Department of Education (“the Department”), overseen by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (“BESE,” pronounced “Bessie”), served as authorizer and was charged with approval of new schools. The Recovery School District (“RSD”) monitored performance, essentially managing the portfolio. It was a unique division of labor, Richmond affirms, but it has worked.

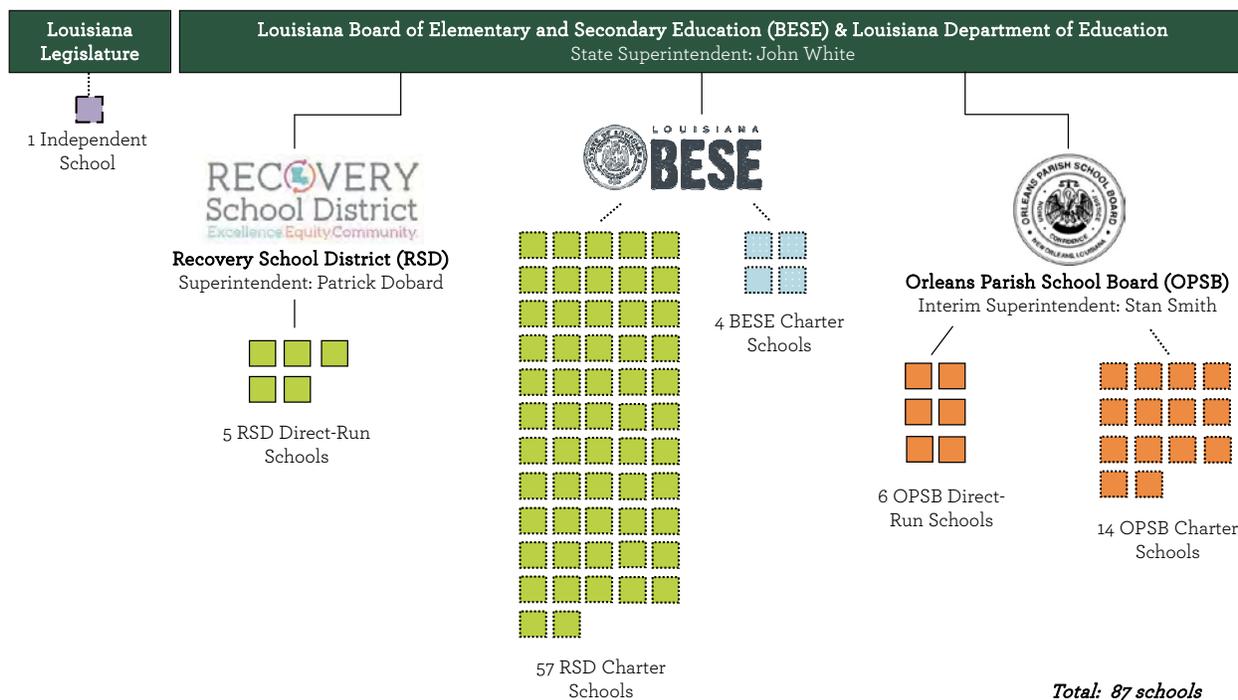
A New Application Evaluation Process

In late 2005, NACSA was hired by the Department and began to overhaul the charter application evaluation process in 2006, adding such key features as non-Department evaluators and applicant interviews. From 2007-2010, NACSA developed and continuously revised and improved the application materials and criteria; orientations and training for potential applicants; and evaluation team composition, preparation, and training.

Kenneth Campbell, director of the Department’s Office of Charter Schools from 2007-2010, describes the community call to demystify the process for applicants and to provide more clearly stated expectations regarding timelines, rigor, and rules. “We spent a fair amount of time early on doing just that, in collaboration with NACSA: running workshops and ads to clarify what charter schools are, describing how to apply, defining how decisions are made, and then figuring out how we would monitor school performance without impinging on school autonomy.”



Governance Structure: 2013-2014 School Year



The Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action-oriented think tank that creates and advances solutions to the issues impeding student achievement in New Orleans and beyond. Areas of concentration include Applied Research, Public Policy, College and Career Readiness, and Reconnecting Opportunity Youth. Additional information can be found online at www.coweninstitute.org.

Deciding on the Merits, Under Pressure

Under pressure in 2006 to approve schools to serve returning families, NACSA recommended six of 44 applicants to the Department for approval during the first application cycle NACSA managed. NACSA insisted on quality operators with demonstrated ability to successfully run urban schools. “That says a lot,” says Usdin, “especially considering the dire need to get schools open.”

“We concerned ourselves with the quality of each application, period,” Richmond describes. “It was not part of the process to choose a certain number or a certain mix of school operators. Cecil Picard [state superintendent at the time] told me he wanted us to have high standards and to recommend only those we thought were good enough, which is exactly what NACSA did.”

NACSA made independent recommendations to the Department, who then prepared recommendations for BESE. BESE went with NACSA’s recommendations, approving only a handful of schools that first round, despite the politics. “They deserve credit,” Richmond says. “They were concerned with quality, first and foremost. Historically the approval rate has stayed rigorous and low: one-third of applications have been approved, and school performance reflects this. NACSA doesn’t take credit for great schools,” he emphasizes. “That credit goes to school leaders, teachers, staff, board members, parents, and students. What we did was take the politics out of the process and set a high bar for approval.”

This high bar is noted by experts outside of New Orleans. In 2011, the *Times-Picayune* indicated that Harvard Professor Paul Peterson “singled out Louisiana for putting a strict system in place to approve charters. In the vast majority of cases, the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has not approved a charter that doesn’t have the recommendation of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Indeed, some local charter groups have been frustrated by the high bar set by the state.”



“Every charter school is governed by a local, nonprofit board, and 350 New Orleans residents currently serve on those boards. There is a much greater level of community engagement in public education than before Hurricane Katrina.”

Leslie Jacobs, Founder, Educate Now!

Campbell recounts how NACSA partnered with the Department: “NACSA was always a leader, thinking constantly about how to raise the quality of our authorizing processes. In the first rounds after Katrina, we had to make some trade-offs to ensure a sufficient supply of schools to meet the demands of returning families. But we gradually ratcheted up quality. Some applicants were surprised it was more of a challenge than they expected to be approved.”

It’s clear that an array of strong leaders shaped the current landscape; together, the handful of leaders interviewed for this case study credit many others. Caroline Roemer Shirley, executive director of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, praises individuals, including Leslie Jacobs, former member of BESE, and Paul Pastorek, former state superintendent: “They recognized that the idea—in the words of

Matt Candler [former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO)]—was not ‘to suck less’ but to create high-quality schools.” New Orleans didn’t want to open schools that were simply an improvement on the poorly performing schools that existed pre-Katrina. They wanted to create the best possible schools that could stack up against any city’s top performers.

Benefits of a Third-Party Reviewer

Local leaders agree the third-party application reviewer was crucial to building a quality sector. Campbell says, “Initially, we contracted with NACSA to run one application evaluation process, but it quickly became clear that it made sense to keep using them. The process was new to the state board, a partially elected, partially appointed body, and this ensured quality proposals could proceed unencumbered by politics, and proposals lacking in quality could be denied on the merits.”

Shirley and Campbell worked on charter law changes to require a third-party evaluator for all charter applicants, whether they are authorized by the state or a district. “A good process provides cover for politicians, who can say, ‘I love you, but our evaluator said that you’re not up to snuff,’” Shirley claims. “When you have an independent evaluator who knows charters and understands how to spot application weaknesses and strengths, it creates more authorizer accountability.”

Over time, NACSA also helped the Department use the application process to increase coordination with the RSD, says Campbell. “We worked with Paul Vallas [then-RSD superintendent] to ensure they got the schools they needed as families moved back,” Campbell describes. “If RSD said, ‘Hey, we need more high schools,’ then the application process would specify that.”

Mission-Driven Operators

The extreme circumstances facing the city after the storm were a critical factor in how New Orleans ended up with deeply mission-driven schools, Usdin claims, much like a domestic Peace Corps. Many applications approved post-Katrina were from local CMOs (Charter Management Organizations) like FirstLine, or local, mission-driven schools like Friends of King Schools or Sophie B. Wright Charter School.

“Part of our success here is the wide array of operators,” Usdin believes. “There is no silver bullet. KIPP [Knowledge is Power Program] is the only national CMO in town. Other operators include former principals,” she describes. “I don’t like the ‘Mom and Pop’ phrase—these are proven educators, attracted by running their own shops. That’s what other cities should ask,” she insists: “Where are the local, mission-driven, deeply talented educators who deserve the autonomy to run their own school?”

Another subset of charter school operators has successfully emerged in New Orleans. Usdin describes them as mission-driven as well, younger, less proven perhaps, but with solid experience and ready to run their own school. These include former TFA (Teach For America) teachers and former KIPP teachers.

The organization she founded, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), invested in numerous charter starters as they created their concepts and applied for approval. “We had to make risky bets; some of those schools have closed, but many of those bets paid off incredibly well,” Usdin says.

Staying True to *Principles & Standards*

Beyond managing application evaluations, NACSA also guided the development of BESE’s first charter contract and first set of performance standards, both within the first year of the rebuilding effort.

The implementation of that accountability system evolved over time. Campbell states, “We didn’t want a big office that by design would lead us to micromanage, since bureaucracies have a tendency to feed themselves. NACSA gave us essential advice on what to own as authorizer, while making sure schools owned their own stuff.”

He describes how NACSA facilitated connections. For example, when the Department wondered what kind of systems and triggers would best alert their small office to potential trouble without unnecessarily burdening charter operators, NACSA introduced them to charter leaders in Washington, D.C. who had done just that and could share solutions. The D.C. Public Charter School Board was one of the earliest authorizers to adopt an academic performance framework to identify the multiple measures that would define success and flag problems.

The Department sought to set up their practices while staying true to the *Principles & Standards* developed by NACSA that have become industry benchmarks and are listed in Louisiana law as the standards for assessing charter applications. “I think it’s possible and I think we did,” Campbell declares. “But I also made sure schools were never surprised. When we made changes, I went out to talk with schools to be sure we were in this together. Schools want what we want: to measure the right stuff at the right time and to have fair but rigorous expectations.”

The state also wanted increased flexibility to recognize performance at renewal time, so the Office of Charter Schools requested a change in the law to allow renewal periods from three to 10 years after the first contract was up, instead of the original renewal for a static five years. “We thought through with schools how to review data in a reasonable way. You can’t force people to do things; the best way is to provide incentives,” Campbell offers. “So this kind of flexibility was important to encourage and reward the highest-performing schools and to keep a keener watch on schools needing to improve.”



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Caroline Roemer Shirley, Executive Director, Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools

Community Engagement; Community Involvement

Leaders say they could have done a better job of community engagement early on. “We knew as a city that we had failed communities before; we were not going to sacrifice quality at this juncture,” says Caroline Roemer Shirley from the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools. “But how do you uphold quality while honoring the deep history and roots of public ed in New Orleans? We didn’t do it,” she believes. “We went for quality first, and then if you got approved, you worked on community involvement.”

“It’s gotten better over time,” Usdin adds. She emphasizes that while it is not an authorizer’s job to engage community, the state has been challenged to find an effective balance. She repeats a theme: “You never want to compromise school quality in your efforts to engage community.”

“Certain groups,” recounts Shirley, “no matter their history or connections, if they were strong applicants, they were approved; if they weren’t, they didn’t get through the process. But it was a very difficult conversation, layered on top of a storm, and people returning to find a changed landscape, with 5,000-plus teachers dismissed.” The issue of resources complicated the conversation. “There were natural haves and have-nots,”

she continues. “Only some applicants had access to both financial and operational resources. Then there’s the precious resource of time: educators with families didn’t have the same time to allot to school creation as established and staffed entities.”

The challenge of community engagement led to a unique partnership between the Department, the Association, and NACSA. “With funding from the Walton Foundation, we created *Apply Yourself*,” explains Shirley, “a three-day boot camp open to anyone. Experts are brought to the table to raise understanding of what quality is, what authorizers look for, and how to access resources,” she describes. Started three years ago, it has blossomed into one of the Association’s best-attended events.

Leaders point to another success story: the approximately 350 local individuals on charter school boards. “Some have asserted there has been too much control by out-of-towners,” says NACSA’s Richmond. “Actually, the school system used to be run by a board of seven people. Today you have hundreds of local leaders with an active voice in overseeing schools. That’s more local control than ever before, not less,” he states.

Part of the challenge to involve local voices stems from the genesis of charters here. “In most places, chartering happens because of an uprising of parents saying, ‘We can do better.’ Here there was a storm, people were gone, and a change was made—was done to people,” Shirley says. “I don’t really know how community engagement and quality authorizing can co-exist. But I don’t regret what we’ve created here,” she states. “People believe we’re moving in the right direction. It’s actually pretty miraculous how much academics have improved.”

A New Sector Replaces Old Central Office

While there is no “central office” at RSD or Orleans Parish School Board—and that presents challenges in serving students—leaders praise the new sector of support that has replaced it. They list nonprofits who work on policy, advocacy, and direct school services, such as the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, New Schools for New Orleans, the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, Educate Now!, Teach For America, The New Teacher Project/teachNOLA, Relay Graduate School of Education, Match Teacher Coaching, Leading Educators, and others—many home grown, some national.

Leslie Jacobs, who, in addition to being a former member of BESE, is a former member of OPSB, key architect of the RSD, and founder of Educate Now!, an education reform nonprofit in New Orleans, describes this unique-to-New Orleans model: “There’s an incredible architecture of support for charter schools. Charters are the system of schools, and with 91 percent of our students in charters, it makes sense that there is a plethora of nonprofits supporting this movement.”

More Clarity to Get the Quality

Even under pressure to open schools fast enough for returning students, attention was given to big-picture strategy as well as on-the-ground practical support. Jacobs points to this key concept of portfolio management for any school district: the need for a clear strategy.

“If I were advising a state on charter policy, I’d tell them ‘You need real clarity to get the quality,’” she stresses. “What are you trying to accomplish? What bar will you hold schools to—more or less rigorous or the same? Are you looking to increase the number of quality seats, to provide parent choice, or to turn around failing schools?” Jacobs says this is an aspect of the New Orleans model that makes sense regardless of location. “From an authorizer’s perspective,” Jacobs asserts, “the more time you spend up front deciding what success means, the more you will meet your purpose in the end.”

One standout benefit of a nearly all-charter district with a clear strategy is this alignment of purpose among stakeholders. “Conversations of district schools versus charter schools don’t happen in New Orleans as they do elsewhere,” observes John Ayers, executive director of the Cowen Institute. “What has evolved instead is a problem-solving attitude. Mostly people want to know: Are the schools good? Then, what can we do together to improve them?”



“The vast majority of schools in New Orleans are locally operated: four out of five charter schools are operated locally as a single-site school or as part of a local network of schools, while one of five is part of a national network of schools. This reflects local priorities and local talent.”

Greg Richmond, President and CEO, National Association of Charter School Authorizers

Improving When Possible / Closing When Necessary

This focus on improvement makes sense, as charters become *the* method of delivering public education to New Orleans’s children. In a nearly all-charter system, charters must provide opportunity for every child and serve every child’s needs. During the early rebuilding years, a rigorous application process was the central strategy to ensure opportunity. There was little ongoing monitoring, particularly on issues such as special education provisions and admission, discipline, and expulsion policies. Predictably, this caused problems; leaders recognized that a rigorous application process, while absolutely necessary, was not sufficient. In recent years the focus has broadened to include monitoring, accountability, and explicit attention to these issues.

Using their new rigorous accountability system, BESE has closed 13 low-performing schools in the city. “We have a movement here,” offers Jacobs. “We’ve taken the worst system in the country and turned it around, and here’s one huge difference: our charters are much more self-policing. We have mission-aligned boards and schools, and when the performance isn’t where it needs to be, people don’t fight it,” she claims. “Instead, they do the right thing and close the school and transition the students to better schools.”

As the charter sector in New Orleans matures, the work of authorizing also becomes more about replication and closures than new starts. Clearly defined performance frameworks are critical so politics don’t come into play at this juncture in the process. “BESE has clearly defined their expectations and stood by them,” says Shirley. “But when you’re sitting in a room and a charter has missed their academic growth targets by a few points, and teachers, students, and parents are asking for ‘one more year, please,’ it’s incredibly hard,” she conveys.

Ayers describes how these performance frameworks continue to be improved with schools at the table. “The state just revised them, improving their rigor. Now they are looking at value-added measures, more growth metrics, and what it means to be successful over time with low-income kids,” he relates. “That will contribute to better renewal and closure decisions.”

Of course, hand-in-hand with the difficult question of when to close a school comes the question of how to create an adequate supply of schools to respond to current community needs. Jacobs describes the need for authorizers to have an integrated plan: “If you up your standards, then you better have operators ready, or you get stuck. You can’t just disperse those kids.”

“This is part of portfolio management, and it depends on your strategy,” says Jacobs. “If you are the Washington, D.C. authorizer with an existing pool of traditional district schools, you’re not responsible for serving all kids with charters and your authorizing reflects that. But if you are a New Orleans authorizer, you have to serve all children, which requires a different set of questions to answer.”

Lessons Learned

A quality charter school approval process means consistently high standards: “Authorizing is largely a function to maintain a high standard. That’s what a good approval process has done for New Orleans. Only schools recommended by NACSA and the Department were even brought to BESE for consideration.”

–Sarah Usdin, Founder and former CEO, New Schools for New Orleans

A quality charter school approval process means increased community engagement: “Every charter school is governed by a local, nonprofit board, and 350 New Orleans residents currently serve on those boards. There is a much greater level of community engagement in public education than before Hurricane Katrina.”

–Leslie Jacobs, Founder, Educate Now!

A quality charter school approval process means greater accountability: “A good process provides cover for politicians, who can say, ‘I love you, but our evaluator said that you’re not up to snuff.’ When you have an independent evaluator who knows charters and understands how to spot application weaknesses and strengths, it creates more authorizer accountability.”

–Caroline Roemer Shirley, Executive Director, Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools

A quality charter school approval process means alignment with local priorities: “The vast majority of schools in New Orleans are locally operated: four out of five charter schools are operated locally as a single-site school or as part of a local network of schools, while one of five is part of a national network of schools. This reflects local priorities and local talent.”

–Greg Richmond, President and CEO, National Association of Charter School Authorizers

A quality charter school approval process means resources are focused on quality control: “While a third-party evaluator is resource intensive, most of our resources went into the development of new schools, not to NACSA as evaluator. NACSA was a great thought partner, and our partnership gave us crucial quality control, creating a model for transparency.”

–Ken Campbell, Former Director of Charter Schools, Louisiana Department of Education, 2007-2010

A quality charter school approval process means great charter schools for New Orleans: “We’ve maintained high expectations for who gets the responsibility and privilege of opening public schools and educating our city’s children. That’s why we have a great charter school sector here. School performance today reflects the quality of that authorizing process.”

–John Ayers, Executive Director, Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives



Looking Ahead

The original plan—for NACSA to run the application process a few times and then turn it over to the state—shifted. Instead, NACSA was asked to manage 12 post-Katrina charter application cycles. Between 2006 and 2012, NACSA managed a team of skilled national and local external experts in the review of more than 250 charter school applications. As NACSA ended its work with the Department, it recognized the improved capacity built there to ensure that high-quality authorizing practices remain uncompromised.

In his letter to BESE and the Department, Richmond stated, “After seven successful years evaluating Louisiana charter school applications, we have decided that it is time for NACSA to step out of this role. The Department has demonstrated that it is now fully capable of managing the application evaluation process, including managing independent reviewers and making recommendations to BESE on its own.” He closed with “The work is not done, but you have a tremendous foundation for the future.”

New Charters Offer New Choices

That foundation will serve the city as their re-crafted public school system matures and expands. Charter schools were initially authorized in New Orleans to replace failing schools and then to replace schools destroyed or damaged badly after the storm. Today, however, charter schools are being authorized to create new choices for city residents. Since 2011, when the state declared OPSB no longer a district in crisis, the local district has authorized a handful of schools to respond to community need.

Although New Orleans now has two authorizers working in the same jurisdiction, leaders say they are not on a level playing field. For example, OPSB doesn’t have access to facilities: RSD still controls most of the city’s school buildings, even if a school is closed.

While having two governing bodies could be seen as a disaster in terms of coordination and planning, there are actually incentives built in to the arrangement, says Ayers. “The law says that BESE-authorized charter schools can return to their local district (OPSB), but only when a school itself votes to do that and BESE then ratifies it. Last year 17 schools were eligible, but none voted to return to OPSB,” Ayers relates. “What does this say? For one, this puts pressure on OPSB to show how they add value.”

Strengthening the Local District

The flip side is the natural concern about “authorizer shopping.” “New Orleans’s taxpayers deserve a consistency of services in public education, regardless of the authorizer,” declares Sarah Usdin, who was elected to the Orleans Parish School Board in late 2012. OPSB’s Office of Charter Schools, under Kathy Padian’s leadership, is working to boost the quality of its nascent authorizing processes and has contracted with NACSA for assistance on application evaluation and accountability systems. Though OPSB currently oversees only a small number of charter schools (14), these efforts will strengthen the local district, says Usdin, and align its authorizing processes with the state.

Usdin says that for OPSB, as for the state, a third-party, Better Business Bureau-type organization reviewing applications is the way to go. “I was always on the outside hoping for approval of schools incubated by NSNO,” she chuckles. “I’ve gone through only one authorizing round from the inside [of OPSB], but that’s enough to know how valuable it is to have a nationally normed group reviewing applications, looking for pitfalls, and making recommendations to the board.”

Double District Coordination

Some cite another concern of this two-district system: young people fall through gaps without a good centralized data system: neither system picks them up. But progress is afoot, and a recently crafted agreement on the coordination of services to special education students between OPSB and RSD is a sign of things to come, says Ayers.

“While there’s a lot to gain from a truly decentralized system, some problems are ideally solved through collective good will and the sharing of solutions,” he offers. “RSD created the OneApp, a centralized enrollment system for parents, and now many OPSB schools are using it, as well. There’s a centralized expulsion policy. There are plans for a joint truancy center across the two systems and pooled revenue to address special education needs,” continues Ayers.



“While a third-party evaluator is resource intensive, most of our resources went into the development of new schools, not to NACSA as evaluator. NACSA was a great thought partner, and our partnership gave us crucial quality control, creating a model for transparency.”

Ken Campbell, Former Director of Charter Schools, Louisiana Department of Education

Taking Advantage of Talent and Training

Cities that want to boost the performance of their schools should take a hard look at talent, as New Orleans has done, says Leslie Jacobs. “Charters schools are simply one governing model. When we compare performance data across the major models (traditional, charter, and voucher), we end up quibbling over a few points of difference. But the variation within each group of schools is huge, with great and crappy schools in each,” she claims. “I’m convinced the only way the charter model gives you better schools is if you have the talent to take advantage of the autonomy the model offers. By ‘talent’ I mean school leaders, teachers, and board. Otherwise, you have autonomous schools but poor results.”

Great schools are born of talent and also lean on a strong mechanism of training, professional development, and other resources. “If you want to have a plethora of great schools in a geographic area, someone needs to support them,” Jacobs says. She holds that while a lot of money went into a national talent search with limited results, the better strategy for New Orleans has been finding promising local operators and investing in their growth. As she notes, there needs to be an answer to the question “How can we help cities build the structure of support for quality homegrown schools?”

Quality on Paper and in Practice

Defining “quality” challenges authorizers around the nation and drives NACSA’s work on a daily basis. “There’s quality on paper versus quality in operations,” offers Shirley, “and what looks good on paper isn’t always what succeeds.” It’s the ultimate quest for any sector, including education: can we connect the dots between what characteristics schools have coming out of the gate and their success long term?

Researchers at Tulane University want to answer that question for New Orleans charter schools. Tulane Professor and Director of Tulane’s Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (*Era*-New Orleans), Douglas Harris, describes the focus of their study on authorizers: “We are looking at what aspects of charter applications may predict whether a school is approved and what aspects of the application may correlate with outcomes.” Working with *Era*-New Orleans Research Associate Whitney Ruble, Harris is also looking at the evaluation rubrics and application evaluations to help unearth these correlations.

“In a system where schools are chosen [by authorizers], the decisions you make have got to be important,” asserts Harris. “But that same system design also makes it difficult to know whether the decisions are good ones. We can’t observe non-approved schools to see how they would have done if they had opened,” he describes.

NACSA’s Richmond looks forward to any new data on correlations between applications and long-term performance in New Orleans. He also emphasizes that the authorizing profession does indeed know quite a lot about evaluating proposals to gauge long-term viability. “We know how to spot an incoherent education plan, a weak governance arrangement, a flawed budget, a mediocre community engagement process, an inconsistent student discipline policy, and more,” he says. “We know these weaknesses in applications compromise a school’s capacity to provide a great education to students.”



“We’ve maintained high expectations for who gets the responsibility and privilege of opening public schools and educating our city’s children. That’s why we have a great charter school sector here. School performance today reflects the quality of that authorizing process.”

John Ayers, Executive Director, Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives

Harris offers the analogy of teacher quality: “Conventional wisdom says it’s hard to determine on the front end who will be a quality teacher, which makes the ability to get rid of bad teachers much more important. If this is true of schools, it makes an authorizer’s ability to close bad schools much more important. While an authorizer can spot obvious red flags on the front end, once a school is open and performing poorly, the systems for renewal and closure become essential.”

Richmond agrees, noting that NACSA’s *One Million Lives* campaign rests on this dual responsibility of authorizers: the need to open more high-quality schools coupled with the need to close low-quality schools. But he cautions against emphasizing the power of closing over the importance of the process on the front end. “It is much easier to say ‘No’ to a questionable application than to close a school down the road. Plus,” he argues, “you avoid spending millions on a school, putting an entire school community through a major upheaval, and potentially wasting years of a student’s life.”

Local Capacity and Commitment

Each leader makes a similar assertion: New Orleans has established and maintained high authorizing standards, which have been key to producing such dramatic performance improvements. Data collected by local stakeholders and external researchers alike show that huge progress has been made in a relatively

short period of time. “We are proud of what we’ve done so far, but certainly don’t want to come across as arrogant,” Caroline Roemer Shirley says, recognizing the real possibility of national fatigue with the New Orleans story. “There is still so much work to be done.”

An all-chartered district is something our country has yet to see. All eyes will remain focused on New Orleans and its ability to successfully give this model long-term legs. It’s no longer just about recovery; New Orleans has created a new model for delivering public education. Will old habits and politics re-emerge to weaken progress, or is this new model sustainable?

Boosting academic performance, creating more specialized and innovative schools, and offering better options to students in low-performing schools are some of the top priorities now. In New Orleans, with its multiple layers of governance and stakeholders, building and maintaining capacity will take shared political will and commitment. Going forward, leaders urge continued and uncompromised dedication to quality authorizing: great expectations for great schools for New Orleans families.

Who's Who in New Orleans

Who They Are	What They Do
<p>Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)</p> <p>Chas Roemer, President</p> <p>http://bese.louisiana.gov/home</p>	<p>BESE is the administrative body for all Louisiana public elementary and secondary schools. BESE adopts regulations and enacts policies governing the operations of the schools under its jurisdiction and exercises budgetary oversight of their educational programs and services. The Board is composed of 11 members: eight members are elected, one from each of the state's eight BESE districts, at the same time Louisiana's governor is elected. Three additional members are appointed by the governor to represent the state at-large.</p>
<p>Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE)</p> <p>John White, State Superintendent</p> <p>www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/charter-schools</p>	<p>The Louisiana Department of Education is responsible for the oversight of BESE-authorized charter schools.</p>
<p>Recovery School District (RSD)</p> <p>Patrick Dobard, Superintendent</p> <p>www.rsdla.net/index.jsp</p>	<p>Established in 2003, the RSD is a special school district run by the LDOE that intervenes in the management of chronically low-performing schools. The RSD has 80 schools (68 in New Orleans, representing 80 percent of NOLA students), including direct-run schools and charter schools, and has agreements with school districts for managing schools that are eligible to be moved into the RSD. The turnaround model is designed to support autonomy, flexibility, and innovation.</p>
<p>Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) Charter School Office</p> <p>Kathleen Padian, Deputy Superintendent</p> <p>www.opsb.us/charter-schools</p>	<p>The OPSB serves approximately 11,000 students in 20 schools (6 direct-run and 14 charters). After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the State Legislature restructured the New Orleans Public Schools, assigning governance authority for these 20 well-performing schools to the OPSB and 68 under-performing schools to the RSD (currently 5 direct-run and 63 charter schools), with the intent of having the RSD schools return to the OPSB after they attained acceptable academic performance.</p>
<p>Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools (LAPCS)</p> <p>Caroline Roemer Shirley, Executive Director</p> <p>http://lacharterschools.org</p>	<p>The mission of the LAPCS is to support, promote, and advocate for the Louisiana charter school movement, increasing student access to high-quality public schools statewide.</p>
<p>New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO)</p> <p>Maggie Runyan-Shefa and Michael Stone, CEOs</p> <p>www.newschoolsforneworleans.org</p>	<p>NSNO was developed in 2006 to support the accelerating school reform effort. NSNO serves the city as a strategic leader, accelerates high-quality school development and acts as a landing pad to grow, connect, and sustain school support organizations.</p>
<p>Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University</p> <p>John Ayers, Executive Director</p> <p>www.coweninstitute.com</p>	<p>The Cowen Institute mission is to advance the success of New Orleans children and young adults on their educational pathways through research, policy analysis, and programs that support youth. Launched in 2007, the Cowen Institute chronicles reforms and assesses their impact on youth and families; promotes practical application of knowledge gained; uses research to develop programs and to advance effective public policies; and seeks to work in partnership with others to enhance the success of K-12 education and to strengthen career pathways for Opportunity Youth.</p>

Who's Who in New Orleans (continued)

Who They Are	What They Do
<p>Educate Now! Leslie Jacobs, Founder http://educatenow.net</p>	<p>Educate Now! is a nonprofit organization dedicated to effective and sustainable reform of New Orleans public schools. Their mission is carried out by providing current, comprehensive information on education reform in New Orleans; lending programmatic support to educational reforms in New Orleans; and advocating for decentralized, quality public schools for all students in New Orleans.</p>
<p>Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (Era-New Orleans) at Tulane University Douglas N. Harris, Director http://educationresearchalliancenaola.org</p>	<p>The objective of <i>Era</i>-New Orleans is to provide rigorous, objective, and useful research to understand the post-Katrina school reforms in New Orleans schools. Based at Tulane University, the group is a partnership with supporters and critics of the reforms. Its research agenda focuses on the roles of the new educator workforce, test-based accountability, parental choice, and charter management organizations and their collective influence on teaching and learning.</p>
<p>National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) Greg Richmond, President and CEO www.qualitycharters.org</p>	<p>NACSA provides training, consulting, and policy guidance to authorizing offices and other entities focused on quality authorizing of charter schools. It also advocates for laws and policies that raise the bar for excellence among authorizers and the schools they charter.</p>

Performance of New Orleans Charter Schools Compared to Their Local Markets¹⁰

Subject	Significantly Worse		Not Significant		Significantly Better	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Reading	3	6%	23	44%	26	50%
Math	2	4%	18	35%	32	62%

At the school level, 50 percent of New Orleans charter schools have significantly better learning gains in reading than their district school peers and 62 percent of charters outperform in math gains. Both of these results are dramatically better than the 2013 national study's proportion of better-performing charters (25 percent in reading and 29 percent in math).¹¹ Only 6 percent of schools in reading and 4 percent in math had average growth that was significantly lower than their local market.

¹⁰ Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO): "Charter School Performance in Louisiana 2013"

<http://credo.stanford.edu/>

¹¹ Cremata, Edward, et al. National Charter School Study 2013 (2013). <http://credo.stanford.edu>

New Orleans Timeline

- 1995**
 - Charter school law is passed in Louisiana.

- 2003-2004**
 - Louisiana Department of Education establishes the Recovery School District and takes over jurisdiction of five failing New Orleans public schools.

- 2005**
 - Hurricane Katrina hits the city, followed by the breaching of levees, causing extensive flooding.
 - The state moves in to take over more failing and now-flooded schools and is catalyzed to rebuild city schools using charters.
 - NACSA is hired by the Louisiana Department of Education to manage its charter school application evaluation process and create a charter contract and performance standards.

- 2006-2012**
 - NACSA manages a team of experts in the review of more than 250 charter school applications during 12 application cycles.

Contributors



John Ayers
Executive Director,
Cowen Institute for Public
Education Initiatives



Leslie Jacobs
Founder, Educate Now!



Kenneth Campbell
Former Director of
Charter Schools,
Louisiana Department of
Education, 2007-2010



Caroline Roemer Shirley
Executive Director,
Louisiana Association
of Public Charter Schools



Douglas N. Harris
Director, Education
Research Alliance for New
Orleans



Sarah Usdin
Founder and former
CEO, New Schools for
New Orleans

Resources/Links

Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives www.coweninstitute.com

Educate Now! <http://educatenow.net>

Education Research Alliance for New Orleans <http://educationresearchalliancenola.org>

Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools <http://lacharterschools.org>

Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education <http://bese.louisiana.gov/home>

Louisiana Department of Education www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/charter-schools

New Schools for New Orleans www.newschoolsforneworleans.org

Orleans Parish School Board Charter School Office www.opsb.us/charter-schools

Recovery School District www.rsdl.net/index.jsp

Related resources on NACSA's Knowledge Core:

Core Performance Framework and Guidance

<http://nacsa.mycrowdwisdom.com/diweb/catalog/item/id/126547/q/c=82&t=2221>

Core Resource Charter School Application

<http://nacsa.mycrowdwisdom.com/diweb/catalog/item/id/77027/q/c=82&t=2221>

Core Charter School Renewal Application and Guidance

<http://nacsa.mycrowdwisdom.com/diweb/catalog/item/id/139196/q/c=82&t=2221>

Core Charter School Contract

<http://nacsa.mycrowdwisdom.com/diweb/catalog/item/id/105582/q/c=82&t=2221>

Core Closure Protocol and Guidance

<http://nacsa.mycrowdwisdom.com/diweb/catalog/item/id/110486/q/c=82>



NACSA develops quality authorizing environments that lead to a greater number of quality charter schools. Learn more about NACSA at www.qualitycharters.org.

National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2014

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