IS THERE CHOICE IN SCHOOL CHOICE?

School Program Offerings in the New Orleans Public Schools Market

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One argument for school choice and competition-driven school improvement is that it might lead schools to provide distinctive options for families—and a better fit between schools and student needs. For example, schools might differ in terms of academic theme, instructional hours, or extracurricular offerings. However, where choice and competition are accompanied by other policies such as test-based accountability, the ability of schools to stand out from the pack may be lessened. This brief examines differentiation among New Orleans public schools and finds that New Orleans schools differentiate themselves on certain measurable characteristics, creating an education market made up of distinct groups of schools and schools that seem unique. We also compare school differentiation in New Orleans to other cities.

THE NEW ORLEANS CONTEXT

New Orleans provides a unique opportunity to study how school-choice policies affect school differentiation. Most of the city's schools are open-enrollment schools, meaning that school assignment is not based mainly on geographic attendance zones. Also, the city's schools are governed by three different agencies: the state's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), the Recovery School District (RSD), and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). While most of the city's schools are charter schools, which are managed by more than 30 different charter management organizations (CMOs), New Orleans also has a handful of district-run schools. With many different organizations trying to run schools, this reinforces the potential for schools to differentiate.

In practice, however, differentiation may be impeded by several factors. First, while there are two different school authorizers (OPSB and BESE), they may want the same types of schools. After opening, regulations and accountability requirements could further

stifle school diversity: for example, failure to meet strict test-based requirements allows governing agencies to terminate charter contracts. The risk of closure, either from test-based rules or other types of contract failure, may lead schools to play it safe by imitating successful school models. In New Orleans, since 2007, 45 schools have been closed, merged, or turned over to other operators.

Other regulations may also affect whether schools differentiate themselves. For instance, the state Department of Education (DOE) requires all schools, including charters, to participate in the statewide teacher evaluation system. Although charter schools have greater freedom in choosing which teachers they hire, being subjected to the same evaluation system as all other schools could lead schools to hire and develop similar teachers. Further, large charter management organizations (CMOs), which manage a growing share of New Orleans schools, may attempt to leverage economies of scale by replicating a single model at multiple schools, and CMOs that manage only one or a few schools may choose to imitate successful school strategies rather than differentiating. As a result, the strategies of CMOs, rather than the needs of families and students, could drive the market, leading to more imitation and less diversity. Finally, it could be that New Orleans families generally agree on what kind of schools they want and this, too, would lead schools to become similar.

In short, regulations, charter supply strategies, and family preferences may either increase or decrease differentiation. To gain a better understanding of what happens in practice, we need to analyze the data describing school characteristics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study we asked the following questions:

- Are New Orleans schools generally alike or different?

- How do the differences and similarities among schools relate to their governing agencies (BESE, OPSB, or RSD) and school type (independent charter, networked charter, or district-run)?

- What does the structure of the market for education in New Orleans look like? Are there many market segments (i.e., groups) of similar schools? Are there niche schools that do not appear similar to any other schools?

- How does the school differentiation we observe in New Orleans compare to similar cities with far less choice?

DATA AND METHODS

We focus on the 2014–15 school year, during which all RSD schools were operated by CMOs (including the schools formerly run directly by the RSD). During this same year, OPSB operated a small number of district schools and was expanding its own charter school portfolio, while a small group of charter schools continued under direct oversight of BESE.

Our data on school characteristics come from the spring 2014 edition of the *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools*, which is published annually by a local nonprofit organization and widely distributed to parents. This publication is the primary source of information for parents choosing schools in New Orleans. From the guide, we focused on eight school characteristics:

1. Whether the school mission is "college prep"

2. Whether the school has a specific curricular theme (e.g., math, technology, or arts)

3. Number of other extracurricular activities ("extras") offered

4. Number of school instructional hours (annual total)

5. Whether the school has selective admissions or open enrollment

6. Number of sports offered

7. Number of grades served

8. Number of staff to support exceptional student needs (nurses, therapists, social workers, etc.).

We analyze elementary schools and high schools separately. We define elementary schools as those with any grade K–4, and high schools as those with any grade 9–12. New Orleans school operators can select each school's grade span, and it is quite common for elementary schools to serve grades K–8. A small number of schools that serve only middle-school grades (5–8) were not included in this study.

To understand how governing agencies affect school differences, we grouped schools according to whether they were overseen by

BESE, OPSB, or RSD and compared them across the eight school characteristics. We do this to test the idea that, if these three governing agencies want different schools, then each agency's schools might look similar, while schools overseen by different agencies should be different.

Next, we grouped schools according to school type (independent charter, networked charter, or district-run) in order to understand whether schools of the same type are similar, and whether schools of different types are different. Here, we test the idea that CMO strategies are related to the amount of differentiation we observe across schools.

Finally, to understand the market overall without preconceptions about the influence of governing agencies or school type, we used a statistical method known as *cluster analysis* to group schools according to their observed similarities across the eight characteristics listed above.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RESULTS

We first examine school characteristics by governing agency alone (BESE, OPSB, or RSD). Among most of the characteristics from the *Parents' Guide*, we find that the only statistically significant difference among the agencies is that RSD schools have more instructional hours than OPSB or BESE schools. When we group schools according to management type we find no statistically significant differences across types. In other words, governing agency and management type are not associated with differences across elementary schools in New Orleans. More plainly, it is not possible to predict an elementary school's characteristics based its governing agency or its management type.

> " *It is not possible to predict an elementary school's characteristics based on its governing agency or management type.* "

When using cluster analysis to group elementary schools, the results suggest that there are 10 groups of similar elementary schools in New Orleans. Compared to other groupings, these 10 groups, or clusters, have the greatest degree of similarity within clusters and

the greatest difference among the clusters. The 10 clusters are statistically different along most of the characteristics, except the number of support staff (see Table 1 on the following page).

The largest cluster of similar schools includes 19 RSD charter schools with longer-than-average school hours and a college prep mission. The second largest cluster contains two OPSB charter schools and 10 RSD charter schools. These schools have near-average values for most of the measures and do not have a curricular theme or college-prep mission. There are six more clusters that have at least one school with a curricular theme, and three of these six clusters contain only schools that also have a college prep mission. The only characteristic that is similar among all the clusters is number of student support staff.

Finally, two elementary schools appear alone outside of the 8 eight clusters described above. They are not sufficiently similar to any other schools to form part of a multi-school cluster and instead occupy unique niches in the market. The first is an RSD charter school with no curricular theme or college-prep mission, but higher than average numbers of extracurricular activities, sports, and student support staff. The second is a selective admissions OPSB charter school with a curricular theme, shorter hours, more extracurricular activities and sports, and a large grade span.

HIGH SCHOOL RESULTS

The 22 New Orleans high schools include 12 RSD, 7 OPSB, and 3 BESE schools. There are 11 networked charter high schools, 9 independent charter schools, and 2 district-run schools. When grouping the schools by governing agency, we find differences in the number of sports offered and the number of student support staff across groups: OPSB and RSD high schools tend to offer a greater number of both sports and student support staff than BESE schools. When we group high schools by management type (independent charter, networked charter, or district-run), we find no statistically significant differences across schools on most of the school characteristics. Thus, there does appear to be some evidence that high schools in New Orleans differ by governing agency.

The clearest patterns emerge when we allow for 10 clusters, four of which contain multiple schools and the remaining six contain one school (see Table 2 on page 5). The largest cluster includes six high schools—one OPSB school and five RSD networked charter schools

Table 1. Elementary School Clusters Grouped According to Similarities in Program Characteristics

A flexible clustering strategy creates groupings that are more similar within a group and more different across groups than categorization based on governing agency and charter type.
The programmatic characteristics by which these schools are clustered are outlined in the numbered list on page 2 under the "Data and Methods" heading.

Legend:
- RSD Charter (dark)
- RSD Independent Charter (light blue)
- OPSB Charter (orange)
- OPSB District (gold)
- BESE Charter (green)

CLUSTER NUMBER	PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS	SCHOOLS WITHIN THE CLUSTER (NUMBER AND TYPE)
Cluster 1	College Prep More School Hours	17 RSD Charter, 2 RSD Independent Charter
Cluster 2	No Unique Identifiers	4 RSD Charter, 5 RSD Independent Charter, 2 OPSB Charter
Cluster 3	Curricular Theme More Sports and Extras Spans More Grades	4 RSD Charter, 2 OPSB Charter, 1 OPSB District
Cluster 4	College Prep Curricular Theme Fewer Sports and Extras More School Hours	3 RSD Charter, 1 RSD Independent Charter, 1 OPSB District
Cluster 5	Curricular Theme Fewer School Hours More Extras Selective Admissions	2 OPSB Charter, 2 BESE Charter
Cluster 6	Curricular Theme Fewer Sports and Extras Spans Fewer Grades	2 OPSB Charter, 1 OPSB District
Cluster 7	College Prep Curricular Theme Fewer Sports Fewer Support Staff More School Hours Spans More Grades	2 RSD Charter
Cluster 8	College Prep Curricular Theme More Extras Spans More Grades	1 RSD Charter, 1 OPSB Charter
Niche 1	Fewer School Hours More Support Staff Most Sports and Extras Spans More Grades	1 RSD Charter
Niche 2	Curricular Theme Fewest School Hours Most Sports and More Extras Most Support Staff Selective Admissions	1 OPSB Charter

Table 2. High School Clusters & Niches Grouped According to Similarities in Program Characteristics

A flexible clustering strategy creates groupings that are more similar within a group and more different across groups than categorization based on governing agency and charter type.

The programmatic characteristics by which these schools are clustered are outlined in the numbered list on page 2 under the "Data and Methods" heading.

RSD Charter · RSD Independent Charter · OPSB Charter · OPSB District · BESE Charter

CLUSTER NUMBER	PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS	SCHOOLS WITHIN THE CLUSTER (NUMBER AND TYPE)
Cluster 1	College Prep	(5 RSD Charter, 1 OPSB District)
Cluster 2	Curricular Theme Fewer Extras Fewer School Hours	(2 RSD Charter, 2 OPSB Charter, 1 BESE Charter)
Cluster 3	College Prep Curricular Theme Fewer School Hours	(3 RSD Charter)
Cluster 4	Spans More Grades	(1 RSD Independent Charter, 1 OPSB District)
Niche 1	More Extras Selective Admissions	(1 OPSB Charter)
Niche 2	Curricular Theme More School Hours Selective Admissions Spans More Grades	(1 BESE Charter)
Niche 3	Curricular Theme More School Hours Selective Admissions	(1 OPSB Charter)
Niche 4	Curricular Theme More School Hours No Sports Selective Admissions	(1 BESE Charter)
Niche 5	College Prep Curricular Theme Selective Admissions	(1 OPSB District)
Niche 6	College Prep Curricular Theme Spans More Grades	(1 RSD Independent Charter)

run by four different CMOs. The second cluster is also diverse, with five total schools from three governing agency-type combinations. The six outlier high schools include one OPSB district school, two OPSB charters, two BESE charters, and one RSD independent

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charter school.

Five of the six niche schools are selective admissions schools. Five of them have a curricular theme (such as science and math, intercultural studies, or performing arts), and two have a college-prep mission. Generally, the high school niche schools tend to have more extracurricular activities, shorter school hours, and larger grade spans. Niche schools are much more common among high schools, and every selective admissions high school has its own niche.

CROSS-CITY COMPARISONS

In this last section, we ask how differentiation in New Orleans compares with traditional school districts featuring more restricted school choice. We selected cities that were similar to New Orleans in terms of district size and student demographics, but differed in the degree of school choice available to families. This sample includes East Baton Rouge Parish in Louisiana, Clayton County (Atlanta) in Georgia, and Jackson County in Mississippi. In terms of the availability of school choice, charter schools comprise 23% of the market in East Baton Rouge, 9% in Clayton County, and 0% in Jackson County. By comparison, charter schools in New Orleans make up 91% of the schooling market. These stark differences help us test whether the school differentiation in New Orleans is a result of its intensive choice and competition (see Table 3 on the following page).

We collected data on the eight school characteristics described earlier from each district's website, and when available, from individual school websites as well. Comparing the four cities across these measures, we find that schools in Jackson County, the most

How is this Research Related to Other ERA-New Orleans' Studies?

While this study focuses on the variety of options available to families, we have also looked at the topic from the perspective of family needs. In *What Schools Do Families Want (and Why)?* Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen examined how families weighed academic performance, extracurricular activities, distance, and host of other factors. They found that families prefer schools with strong academic performance, but that this was often outweighed by the desire for extracurricular activities and having schools close to home. Low-income families seemed to give particular attention to non-academic factors.

Also, Jane Lincove, Josh Cowen, and Jason Imbrogno address the question, *How Do Families Choose Between Public and Private Schools?* They find that families tend to prefer private schools even when they seem to have the same academic performance and programs as public schools. They also find that families who consider both public and private options seem to have a strong focus on academics.

In ongoing research, we are also examining how school options are evolving over time in New Orleans. In a market-driven system such as that in New Orleans, we might expect schools to adapt to family preferences to increase the number of students in their schools.

traditional school district of the sample, offer the least amount of differentiation across schools, and differ the most from the New Orleans schooling market. Clayton County schools, containing relatively few charter schools, do appear to offer somewhat more variety across the eight characteristics than Jackson County; however, this city also does not offer the degree of differentiation we find in New Orleans. The schooling market with school differentiation similar to New Orleans is East Baton Rouge. We do find that schools in New Orleans are more likely to differentiate on instructional hours and having schools with an academic focus relative to East Baton Rouge. These findings suggest that a moderate amount of

Table 3. District and Program Characteristics Comparison Across Traditional Public School Districts with Similar Student Populations

Statistical analysis tests were run to determine how widely New Orleans public school district characteristics varied in relationship to other public school districts with similar student populations in Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi.

	EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH, LA	CLAYTON COUNTY, GA	JACKSON COUNTY, MS	NEW ORLEANS, LA	
DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS					
Number of High Schools	13	11	7	22	
Percent Charter	23%	9%	0%	91%	
Percent Magnet	31%	0%	0%	0%	
PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS					**VARIANCE TEST ANALYSIS**
Percent of Schools that Offer College Prep	60%	27%	0%	50%	New Orleans schools vary <u>about the same or more</u> in whether they offer college prep
Percent of Schools with Special Curricular Theme	15%	9%	14%	59%	New Orleans schools vary <u>more</u> in whether they have a special curricular theme
Percent of Schools that have Selective Admissions	23%	9%	0%	23%	New Orleans schools vary <u>about the same or more</u> in whether they are selective admissions
Average Number of Extra Curricular Activities Offered	24.17	14.60	8.00	13.23	New Orleans schools vary <u>about the same or more</u> in number of extra curricular activities offered
Average Number of Instructional Hours Per Day	7.26	7.17	7.17	7.92	New Orleans schools vary <u>about the same or more</u> in the number of instructional hours per day
Average Number of Sports Offered	7.85	10.36	7.57	6.77	New Orleans schools vary <u>about the same or less</u> in number of sports offered
Average Number of Grades Served	4.85	4.09	4.00	4.45	New Orleans schools vary <u>more</u> in number of grades served
Average Number of Staff Dedicated to Various Student Services	7.88	14.80	14.14	4.55	New Orleans schools <u>vary less</u> in number of staff dedicated to various student services

school choice, such as what we observe in East Baton Rouge, may be sufficient to allow schools to be responsive to differences in parental school preferences.

DISCUSSION

The argument that a wide variety of schools will emerge in areas where market-based educational reforms have been adopted hinges on varied parental preferences and the ability of schools to actually differentiate. In the New Orleans context, we find that families can choose from among 10 types of elementary schools and 10 types of high schools. In the case of elementary schools, these come mostly

> " *In the New Orleans context, we find that families can choose from among 10 types of elementary schools and 10 types of high schools.* "

in the form of large market segments. At the high school level, most high schools appear to be in one-of-a-kind market niches. Which cluster or segment a school falls into seems largely unrelated to whether it is an independent charter, networked charter, or district-run school.

Similarly, the variation among schools in New Orleans does not seem closely related to which government agency authorizes the schools. While the existence of multiple governing agencies may have contributed to the variation among schools, elementary schools in New Orleans that share the same governing agency are not generally similar, and schools with different governing agencies can be quite similar. In fact, we find variation even among schools managed by a single CMO, and schools that are most similar are often operated by different CMOs.

Our findings do indicate that charter schools governed by the RSD are often, but not always, similar to each other, and typically emphasize a college prep mission and longer school hours. It is unclear if this reflects the RSD's preferences as an authorizer or the fact that RSD schools are previously low performing and therefore more constrained by test-based accountability.

OPSB and BESE both offer a wider range of options than RSD. This is important because it means a single government bureaucracy, such as a school district, can offer diverse options. The wide variety within OPSB is partly due to the fact that they are allowed to have selective admission policies. This means that families of lower-performing children have less access to a variety of options.

While we do find that schools in New Orleans are willing and able to differentiate along the school characteristics we used in this study, we are unable to know if they are actually *responsive* to family preferences or if they are indeed providing a better *fit*. Moreover, even though fit itself is an important factor when considering the expansion of school choice policies, it becomes important only in the context of improving educational outcomes for all kinds of students. Because our study focused on how schools differentiate their schooling options and did not include student outcomes, we are unable to address whether certain types of schools are offering a higher quality educational experience.

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About the Education Research Alliance For New Orleans

The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce objective and rigorous and useful research to support the long-term achievement of all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Orleans Parents' Guide, New Schools for New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website:

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