EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS

A New First: What happened when New Orleans' unprecedented all-charter system was returned to a locally elected school board?

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Summary

The New Orleans school reforms after Hurricane Katrina are well known for how the state took over almost all the city's schools and turned them into the nation's first all-charter school system. For the first 13 years, that system was mostly controlled by the state Recovery School District (RSD), with a role for the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) in only a small share of schools. In 2018, however, the system was "reunified" as New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS), under OPSB control. Because concerns about the local school board and district were at the heart of the original state takeover, this change in governance has significant implications.

Through interviews with state and local education and community leaders about their experiences before, during, and immediately after reunification (2012 to 2020) and examination of new reports, videos of school board meetings, prior research, and student outcome data, we answered the following:

QUESTION 1: How did reunification change the key roles and responsibilities in New Orleans education?

QUESTION 2: What were the political pressures and strategies that shaped the return to local control in New Orleans?

QUESTION 3: How did reunification impact district operations and student outcomes?

FROM THIS ANALYSIS, WE DREW THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS:

- ***We found that reunification created a new kind of school district with power over centralized services, but did not significantly influence day-to-day operations of schools.*** This has created tension with school leaders and the community. However, there is a strong commitment to collaboration and serving all students and improvements in student outcomes have generally been sustained.

- ***Decisions about the legal language of reunification were made through state legislative processes rather than local public meetings.*** The implementation plan for reunification was written by a committee composed mostly of charter school leaders who solicited public input through local meetings but had limited ability to respond to that input because of the restrictions in state law.

- ***Many of the reform policies, practices, and norms were embedded in OPSB well before formal reunification***. The state takeover and Hurricane Katrina each pressured OPSB to adopt many reform principles years before reunification. Other reform steps came under pressure from reform leaders. This early "informal reunification" entailed, among other things, funding the campaigns of reform-friendly board members who, in turn, hired a superintendent with charter school experience. Since the state controlled the timing and form of reunification, the reformers negotiated with OPSB to get their preferred policies and practices.

- ***While the district reunified governing authority within the local OPSB, it was not a traditional "return to local control."*** Compared with before the state takeover, reunification shifted power away from teacher unions and the locally elected board, while charter school leaders, families, and the superintendent gained more power. The local district mainly serves as a charter authorizer, deciding which schools to open and close and coordinating activities such as centralized enrollment. In other respects, the decision-making structure changed so fundamentally that the new roles mentioned above are difficult to compare to pre-Katrina.

- ***School and community leaders reported confusion and tension around OPSB's roles in supporting and holding schools accountable and coordinating system-level improvement.*** Many school and community leaders wanted more active and direct district involvement in school improvement efforts. However, some potential forms of involvement conflict with the legal powers of the local district granted by state law. Even if the district had the money to hire staff who could engage more actively, there is a natural tension between the board's roles in school support and accountability.

- ***The reunification made the relationship between charter leaders and their authorizer more strained.*** School leaders who had worked under the RSD reported that OPSB was less collaborative compared with the RSD. This likely reflects the recent and novel nature of the reforms, the historical mistrust of the OPSB, disagreement over the district's appropriate roles, and disagreement about the district's specific decisions.

- ***The shift to local democratic governance led to clearer decision-making processes, broader participation of school leaders, and less favoritism of particular schools and CMOs.*** Decision-making under the RSD was opaque, which led to a perception of favoritism that no longer seems evident under OPSB. In addition to local public board meetings, OPSB created many other opportunities for engagement with school leaders. This process orientation seems to be partly why some school leaders saw the relationship as less collaborative.

- ***While the reunification shifted control back to the locally elected school board, there was a perception in the community that the board is still not responsive to community voices***. OPSB does not manage the day-to-day operations of charter schools and, therefore, cannot readily respond to parent and community concerns. In addition, the current composition of the elected board is friendly to the reforms and does not support the changes being suggested by some community groups.

- ***Through all the changes in governance and policy, the large improvements in almost all student outcomes during the state takeover period have largely been sustained since reunification.*** While little time has passed since reunification, college enrollment has continued to rise, and student test scores and high school graduation rates have dropped slightly. However, all measures are still well above pre-Katrina levels.

These findings cannot be interpreted as an evaluation of any individual or organization. Our findings cut across many years and leadership transitions and, in particular, cannot speak to the current administration. Furthermore, during our interviews, stakeholders emphasized their strong commitment to collaboration and dedication to effectively serving all students. This, in addition to the continued strong student outcomes, is an encouraging indicator for the future.

While we are primarily interested in informing the New Orleans community's understanding of reunification, the city's reforms will continue to have broader significance nationally as cities like Houston and others pursue new state takeovers of districts and have an increasing share of charter schools. In many respects, the New Orleans reforms have followed a national pattern of state takeovers that utilize charter schools as one part of school improvement efforts. New Orleans represents an intense version of this, with a wholesale shift to charter schools that has produced and maintained larger improvements in student outcomes than perhaps any district in the country. For these reasons, what happens in New Orleans in the years ahead will have ripple effects across the country well into the future.

Background: The State Takeover

In 2005, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the State of Louisiana took over almost all New Orleans schools and turned control over to the state Recovery School District (RSD). Leslie Jacobs took charge of this effort as the city was mostly empty that fall. A former member of OPSB, Jacobs was a member of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) when the storm made landfall. She had also been a key leader and supporter behind other components of state law that made the takeover possible–the charter school law and accountability systems passed in the 1990s and the creation of the RSD in 2003. Through private meetings with mostly state leaders, Jacobs and other reform leaders set in motion the state takeover and subsequent educational reforms in New Orleans.

Over time, the RSD turned management of their schools over to private, non-profit charter school organizations that received public funding and operated under contract with the state. OPSB, which controlled only a fraction of pre-Katrina schools, also changed operations after Katrina, turning most schools into charter schools. OPSB also eliminated attendance zones, fired all its teachers, and ended its collective bargaining agreement with the teachers union. By the time reunification was complete, traditional public schools, as they are typically conceived, were essentially eliminated in New Orleans for the first time in the nation's history.

ERA's prior research has shown that these reforms led to significant improvements in a wide variety of student outcomes, including **test scores, high school graduation, college entry, college graduation**, and **crime**. Still, the results were not entirely positive. Our research also showed that charter schools narrowed the curriculum in ways that **undermined the city's long-standing traditions in the arts**. Some school leaders also **responded to the competition and academic accountability** in ways that did not facilitate genuine educational improvement. The **percentage of Black school leaders and teachers declined**. The end of attendance zones also led to uncertainty among parents about where their children would attend school and kept schools from acting as community anchors as they had in the past.

The state takeover faced controversy partly because it disempowered the locally elected board and local citizens. These reforms, primarily spearheaded by white leaders, disproportionately marginalized local residents, who were predominantly Black. Local residents could vote for one BESE member and other state leaders, but the influence of those votes diminished. Reformers seemed to view the sidelining of the locally elected board and limitations on local input as necessary, given the corruption and dysfunction of the local district during the pre-Katrina period and the difficulties of local control while citizens were evacuated and otherwise trying to rebuild their lives. However, given the long history of civil rights battles necessary to provide Black citizens the right to vote and access public schools on an equal basis, such disenfranchisement is problematic.

Creating the Foundation for Reunification

The state takeover, by law, had to be temporary, though the rules for returning the schools to local control were ambiguous. Some New Orleans legislators, who opposed both the process and the substance of the reforms, introduced bills in the state legislature throughout the 13-year state takeover period to give back control to OPSB. The Republican-led state legislature rebuffed these efforts for many years.

Instead, the reformers, including Jacobs, multiple RSD superintendents, and others who had led the state takeover, slowly laid the groundwork for reuniting the district. The first step was creating the system they wanted under the RSD. This took almost a decade. The RSD gradually turned all the RSD schools over to charter school operators and created new systems to manage enrollment, discipline, and funding in ways that maintained the autonomy of charter schools over day-to-day operations and held them accountable for performance while supporting equitable access to those schools. The RSD also controlled the school facilities for the schools they took over, including the FEMA funds to rebuild them. The rebuilding of the schools and revamping of operations took many years.

In some ways, getting OPSB to embrace the RSD's approach was not difficult. OPSB also adopted a mostly-charter model after Katrina partly because this helped open schools faster and bring in more financial resources. Moreover, the old attendance zones were nearly impossible to maintain because OPSB controlled so few schools, and families returned only gradually across the city after Katrina. Therefore, OPSB adopted many of the key tenets of the reforms simultaneously and in many of the same ways as the RSD. The shift to charter schools, under both RSD and OPSB, created both choice and school autonomy. RSD and OPSB also largely eliminated the roles of teacher unions, further reinforcing school autonomy.

Another key step in setting the foundation was electing OPSB members who were friendly to the reforms. Jacobs and other reformers recruited candidates, made campaign donations, and got others to follow suit–including including donations from individuals tied to the school reform movement nationally. The resulting board selected a new superintendent, Dr. Henderson Lewis Jr., who had experience in and supported charter schools.

In other respects, the decisions by OPSB and RSD policies converged slowly. In 2014, a "Cooperative Endeavor Agreement" between the RSD and OPSB began unifying operations across the city. Through the agreement, OPSB gradually added its schools to the RSD's centralized enrollment system. The agreement also included a weighted student funding formula that provided additional funding to schools serving more students with special needs, mirroring the formula RSD had adopted for its schools in 2007. In 2015, a state law passed that required OPSB to follow through on this funding formula pledge. Two OPSB schools sued because they served fewer students with special needs and, therefore, stood to lose funding. But these schools lost and the RSD approach to funding went into effect for both RSD and OPSB schools.

A decade after the reforms started, the foundation was largely set, and, according to our interviewees, the political pressure for reunification was building. State legislators and BESE members were getting tired of having their work focus so narrowly on New Orleans schools. Also, two key positions were about to change hands at the state level: It was becoming increasingly likely that a Democrat who had voted to end the takeover as a state legislator, John Bel Edwards, was going to become governor and that the reform-friendly state superintendent, John White, "wasn't gonna stay there forever," according to one reformer. Time was up.

ONE REFORMER EXPLAINED THE SITUATION THIS WAY:

Once everybody had sort of gotten into their place where they understood what a functional system could look like and the muscle memory had begun to be built around enrollment, around expulsion, around [weighted] student funding, around actual capital plans around maintaining buildings, around what you do to engage community when a school fails…these were all things that needed to be developed, we felt outside of legislation and just in practice. And so we felt in 2016 like getting behind a piece of legislation was reasonable because we've been at it for five or six years and building this stuff with the New Orleans public school system, with the charter management organizations, with their parents and constituents.

The reformers still had just as much power as they had a decade prior and a clear direction they wanted to pursue. So, the reformers held private meetings to create a framework for the legislation and finalize the language of a bill that would return some control to OPSB. Jacobs organized some of these meetings, some occurred among state legislators, and others involved RSD and OPSB leadership.

Act 91: Cementing the Reforms in Place

The bill that the reformers spearheaded was passed into law as **Act 91** in 2016 and created a two-year transition period to move the schools to OPSB control. In 2018, OPSB would become the authorizer of almost all the charter schools within the district's boundaries. (The state still authorizes a handful of schools.)

But this was not the "return to local control" that reform opponents had hoped for. On the contrary, the reunification largely cemented the reforms and the reduced role of the local school board.

ACT 91 PRECLUDED THE DISTRICT FROM CARRYING OUT ITS TYPICAL PRE-TAKEOVER FUNCTIONS:

In order to ensure the appropriate level of autonomy to enable educators to successfully prepare students for success in college and career: …Unless mutually agreed to by both the charter school's governing authority and the local school board …the local school board shall not impede the operational autonomy of a charter school under its jurisdiction in the areas of school programming, instruction, curriculum, materials and texts, yearly school calendars and daily schedules, hiring and firing of personnel, employee performance management and evaluation, terms and conditions of employment, teacher or administrator certification, salaries and benefits, retirement, collective bargaining, budgeting, purchasing, procurement, and contracting for services other than capital repairs and facilities construction.

This legal language makes it challenging for OPSB to do almost all the things that local school districts typically do "unless mutually agreed to" with the charter schools. With these key duties under the power of charter school operators, what remains for the district? There are three main roles.

- ***Charter authorization.*** This is the most obvious and perhaps most powerful role. The district has the power to write contracts with charter school managers and, within some boundaries of state law, to close any school that it deems to be failing according to these contractual provisions. The district also runs the portfolio planning process that determines which schools get to open and in which school buildings they operate. As almost the sole authorizer in the city, OPSB is also responsible for soliciting public input in decisions about what mix of schools is necessary to meet student needs. These are all critical decisions for schools and the community.
- ***Coordination of the school system.*** The local district also manages the centralized enrollment system, sets common rules and processes for student expulsions, raises public funds through its taxing authority, determines the differentiated funding formulas, funds and oversees services for students with special needs, and manages the Systemwide Needs Program, which funds and supports special programs to improve the New Orleans school system, such as teacher training and recruitment.
- ***Facilities management.*** The district now owns and controls all of the buildings again. In addition to assigning charter schools to specific buildings, the district is responsible for raising funds for capital repairs, renovation, and new construction; it also sees that buildings provide safe and effective learning environments.

The first role in the above list–charter authorizing–is similar to the role of all charter authorizers in Louisiana and is, therefore, redundant with the state's broader charter school law. However, Act 91 made OPSB's roles different from any other authorizer. For example, the law prevented OPSB from requiring schools to participate in a districtwide collective bargaining agreement. In addition, the coordination and facilities management roles were included in Act 91 to ensure that OPSB had the powers necessary to make an all-charter system work.

In some ways, comparing the district's responsibilities before and after the reforms is difficult because the potential roles are fundamentally different. Traditional school districts do decide what schools to open and close, but their framework for doing so is not built around performance contracts in the way they are with charter schools. Indeed, performance seems to play a **small role** in traditional district closure decisions.

ONE CMO LEADER EXPLAINED WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE:

NOLA Public Schools is our authorizer, so they issued the charter that we operate under, and they have the ability to revoke said charter under certain parameters that exist…I [as a CMO leader] ensure that we are compliant with all applicable laws and policies and responsibilities to our authorizer.

Act 91 also stipulated the types of schools OPSB could open. Most traditional school districts also aim to create some number of schools, each school providing essentially the same mix of services. In New Orleans, starting with the state takeover and continuing under reunification, the goal switched to providing a variety of schools. As Act 91 states, OPSB's mission is "to ensure that a ***diverse*** system of schools led by multiple high-quality operators exists at all times" (italics added).

Similarly, in traditional school districts without school choice policies, there is no need for a centralized enrollment system. The district simply decides where to draw the attendance boundaries, and then "school choice" occurs through parents' difficult and often expensive housing decisions. These are fundamentally different approaches. The reforms did not only change who had which powers but which powers existed. As one member of an advocacy organization explained, "They're the authorizer of schools….[they're] really rewriting what a traditional school district's roles and responsibilities would be."

Act 91 also stipulated who should be involved in developing the reunification plan, which was intended to facilitate implementation. The OPSB superintendent was tasked with developing the plan in coordination with the RSD superintendent and a Unification Advisory Committee, consisting of 9 school leaders and 2 leaders of education advocacy organizations selected by the OPSB and RSD superintendents. The committee developed a draft plan in the summer of 2016, which they shared with the community through meetings at schools across the city. The committee reported that more than 250 community members provided input.

The committee did not have the power to make its plan district policy and, as it was limited to implementation, the committee was confined to the provisions of Act 91 discussed above–accountability, coordination (e.g., enrollment and special education), funding, and facilities. OPSB approved the committee's final plan in August of 2016.

The implementation of Act 91 can be viewed in at least two ways. On the one hand, it was the first time since Katrina that local community input had been an official part of the process. On the other hand, the potential impact of that input was limited. The committee was composed almost entirely of school leaders and heavily circumscribed by state law.

ONE DISTRICT LEADER VIEWED THE PUBLIC ELEMENT OF THE REUNIFICATION PLANNING AS A MEANS OF CONTINUING TO KEEP THE DISTRICT IN CHECK:

It was a clear way of making it very public so that if, for any reason, there was something that all those groups [represented in the committee] were in opposition of, it was a way to publicly shame the district and stop it from happening before it would ever get on the agenda with all the Orleans Parish School Board. You can see that there was great control from how Act 91 was written to what was required for [OPSB] to do in the unification plan. Then it was heavily monitored.

The goal of the passage of Act 91 and the reunification process was to have the OPSB operate as the RSD had during its 13-year time at the helm of the city's schools. In that respect, the process was quite successful.

Remaining Ambiguity on New District Roles

In some ways, Act 91 was explicit about the district's new roles, but challenges arose when implementing them. State and school leaders we interviewed still reported confusion and conflict over what the district was supposed to do in practice.

Several CMO and school leaders said that the local district is still trying to figure out what managing a portfolio district of schools means. While the law gave the district some authority over districtwide functions (such as centralized enrollment), some of the school leaders we interviewed wanted the district to go further than what was outlined in Act 91.

ONE CMO LEADER PERCEIVED THAT THE RSD HAD BEEN MORE WILLING TO HELP THEM WHEN THEY STRUGGLED WITH SCHOOL MANAGEMENT:

In a decentralized district, if we wanna run our district this way, this is—we have to actually cooperate differently. I don't think our district, NOLA PS, understands that as well as the RSD did. It's just a different economic game… The district has to help all of us manage.

This comment highlights the challenges in balancing school autonomy and support. With the long list of actions in Act 91 that the district cannot take (see above), it has little authority to "help all of us manage" at the school level.

A different issue also arose from other interviewees. One state leader noted a need for the district to act as a liaison between the state and charter schools with regard to state policy and rules and as a leader in conversations with the city government and philanthropies around citywide needs, such as truancy. This same state leader noted that this was difficult because of the district's limited management responsibility and the challenge of speaking with one voice, and as a true representative of schools that were autonomous from the district. School leaders, meanwhile, commented that they felt left out of discussions with the state.

Everyone seems to agree on the need for a better connection between New Orleans schools and broader city and state initiatives, but the system's design makes it difficult for the district to play that role.

Strained Relationships between the District and School Leaders

Given the apparent disagreement and confusion about roles, it may come as no surprise that various interviewees reported strained relationships between the district and schools.

Some school and CMO leaders reported that NOLA-PS was not "putting in full effort" or providing services that could support school operations across the district, including food services, insurance, and transportation. However, a key goal of the reforms has been to give schools more autonomy over these activities and contracts--to keep the district out of management.

Another school leader mentioned wanting to build on the district's "economy of scale" so schools could more easily afford these services. For example, OPSB requires all of their schools to provide free transportation options for all of their students, which continues to be one of the largest non-salary budget line items for schools. One interviewee reported that in 2018 a working group was convened to consider centralizing transportation, but it was decided that this would not reduce costs. (Higher transportation costs appear to be a built-in feature of a system of choice where students travel farther to school.) It could be that the school leader quoted above was unaware of these efforts toward coordination.

Trust was also an issue. A reformer reported that: "One of the biggest challenges is the lack of trust between the charters and NOLA-PS…[charter leaders] feel [the district is] weaponizing information." Similarly, some of the school leaders we interviewed feared that any requests for support may be met with repercussions when school closure and charter renewal decisions are being made.

In addition, the school leaders we interviewed did not feel like the district considered their opinions and concerns when making new policy decisions. One school leader said, "They don't care what we think. We work every single day inside schools with kids. They have no interest in what we think about it. It's bizarre. It's really weird." The district does have a process of notification, feedback, and discussion embedded into its policy-making process. However, school leaders still felt like their voices were not being heard, at least during the period of our analysis (up until 2020).

The perceived lack of collaboration appears to be the strongest with closure and facility decisions. CMO leaders claimed the RSD considered their needs and expansion plans when deciding where to site schools, but NOLA-PS is making these decisions without considering how new competition or expansion will affect their operations.

ONE CMO LEADER DESCRIBED AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THIS PROCESS UNFOLDED WHILE THEY WERE PLANNING TO EXPAND:

We went to the district and said, "We want to expand…Would you help us?" …They were like, "Yeah, you're on your own. If you wanna do that, we're not gonna give you the names of the kids in those schools or give you any ways to contact them, but we won't get in your way. We're not gonna give you a building, but we won't get in your way"… We went to expand. Two weeks later we hear they're gonna let an operator [nearby] that is gonna have a hundred kids a grade…all of the elementary schools are like, "What? This affects our bottom line." …let's close failing schools and give people good options is, I think, something we all want. Let's do it in a way that doesn't bankrupt your existing operators who are doing well.

This disconnect between NOLA-PS and school leaders is noteworthy considering the heavy role school leaders played in the implementation planning process. One NOLA-PS leader claimed that the district followed the Unification Plan as if it were "a bible" to ensure there was a fair and structured process for their decisions.

AS ONE DISTRICT LEADER PUT IT:

Because you want [this school] building, or because you want the school that's on Tulane Avenue or what have you, there is a process that we follow to either sell a building or go ahead and actually do some type of CEA. Just because of who you are, we cannot just go ahead and say, "Yeah, we're gonna make this happen for you," right? It's very clear. Really, [our] work with [our] team from the district, along with community leaders, was really many times to just make sure that people understand the rules and the regulations

School leaders seemed to want more active engagement, while multiple interviewees mentioned the district saw its role more as managing a process and following rules. A state leader commented that the reform logic is for schools to compete and the district's main role is to hold them accountable. CMO and school leaders are under pressure–some of that pressure is supposed to come from the authorizer, now OPSB. In this respect, strained relations are almost part of the design.

Other interviewees commented about the number and types of people who were hired into the district administration. Some commented that bringing in a superintendent, Dr. Lewis, who had charter management experience in New Orleans but no system-level governance experience in this new school system, created additional complications. While it is common for any district school to bring in new leadership, it may have been more difficult to manage in New Orleans, where there was already ambiguity about the district's roles. Some in the reform community had wanted to hire someone from within who was already familiar with and accepting the New Orleans reform model and the RSD's approach.

It was not just about one individual as some interviewees commented on the broader issue of district capacity. One school leader claimed: "OPSB just seems overwhelmingly understaffed." The generally sparse district staff that comes with a decentralized system and turnover at the district level make it challenging for the district to take on the more aggressive roles desired by some interviewees.

Several factors therefore, seem to have contributed to the strained relationships between school leaders and the district. The new outside leadership had to address unclear and conflicting district roles, the difficulties CMO and school leaders face in handling their many responsibilities, limited district resources, the competitive nature of the reforms, and the shift to a more rules-based approach to school governance.

Local Control and Community Voice

For many who advocated for reunification, a key goal was to give the local community a greater voice in school decisions. This had been lacking in the initial post-Katrina decision to adopt a state takeover, partly because the evacuation eliminated standard aspects of civic participation. The Unification Plan included many references to the district's role in engaging with the community and the district followed through on these, but the scope for this input to impact decisions was limited.

We heard from some community advocates that community engagement remains an issue. Yes, the schools were again under the locally elected board's control. Local citizens can exercise their right to vote for board members who now control most of the schools in the city. They can campaign for their preferred candidates, hold rallies, and speak during the public comment period at publicly held and televised board meetings.

Still, it is not hard to see why families still do not feel like their voices are being heard. The Unification Plan categorized and reported the concerns raised in public meetings. Three of the top four topics raised by community members–curriculum, teacher training, and discipline–are not addressed in any way in the plan. That is not surprising, given that these areas are outside the legal purview of the district, but this is nevertheless indicative of the limited potential of community engagement.

The community has struggled to adapt to the district's roles, just as the CMO and school leaders have. In a traditional school district, if a citizen or group representative goes to a school board meeting and complains about something happening at a school, the superintendent would have more authority to require changes in school operations. But, in an all-charter school district, the superintendent only has the authority to force change if the schools are not complying with the law or their contracts. The board and superintendent are supposed to stay at arm's length from decisions about the day-to-day operation of schools.

ONE COMMUNITY MEMBER VOICED THEIR FRUSTRATION DURING A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING:

We are becoming more and more disenchanted with our schools returning to [OPSB] if you are going to do nothing but approve charters. Will you respond to what these children, parents, and community need? What are we voting you into these positions for if you are not going to represent and run these schools? Why even bring them back under [OPSB]?

The board does have some authority and could push the envelope on its ability to intervene in school management. Still, the reformers' success in electing their preferred board members has kept this from happening. The board could create neighborhood schools, as some have called for, but the board has not supported these moves. The topic of community schools was also raised many times in the Unification Plan, but the committee did not address it. In this respect, the concerns about community voice reflect disagreement between some community members and OPSB about what kind of schools are best.

According to several of our interviewees at the state, local, and school levels, one local group that had influence and worked in close coordination with the RSD was non-profit New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). Organized under its own board of education and community leaders, NSNO initially helped recruit teachers and incubate new charter school operators. When the RSD relinquished control, many RSD staff and leadership members transitioned to roles at NSNO to help maintain and improve the reforms.

ONE DISTRICT LEADER REFERRED TO NSNO'S POWER THIS WAY:

I knew if [OPSB] was gonna be successful … and get the schools back, I knew, in the very beginning, [we] had to not only co-lead public education with [NSNO], but I knew they were the authority. They were the voice, right? [We] had to, in a very strategic way, … work hard to build relationships.

THIS NOTION OF NSNO'S "CO-LEADERSHIP" WAS REINFORCED BY A CMO LEADER WHO TALKED ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION'S ROLE IN DISTRICT POLICY-MAKING:

I think NSNO has supported significantly on the policy side because of the lack of experience [within OPSB] in doing that area. That wasn't true when I first came over. There was more experienced people who wrote their own policies. Those people left, so NSNO has taken on that role. I don't know if they should, but if no one else is doing it, somebody else has — somebody has to do it.

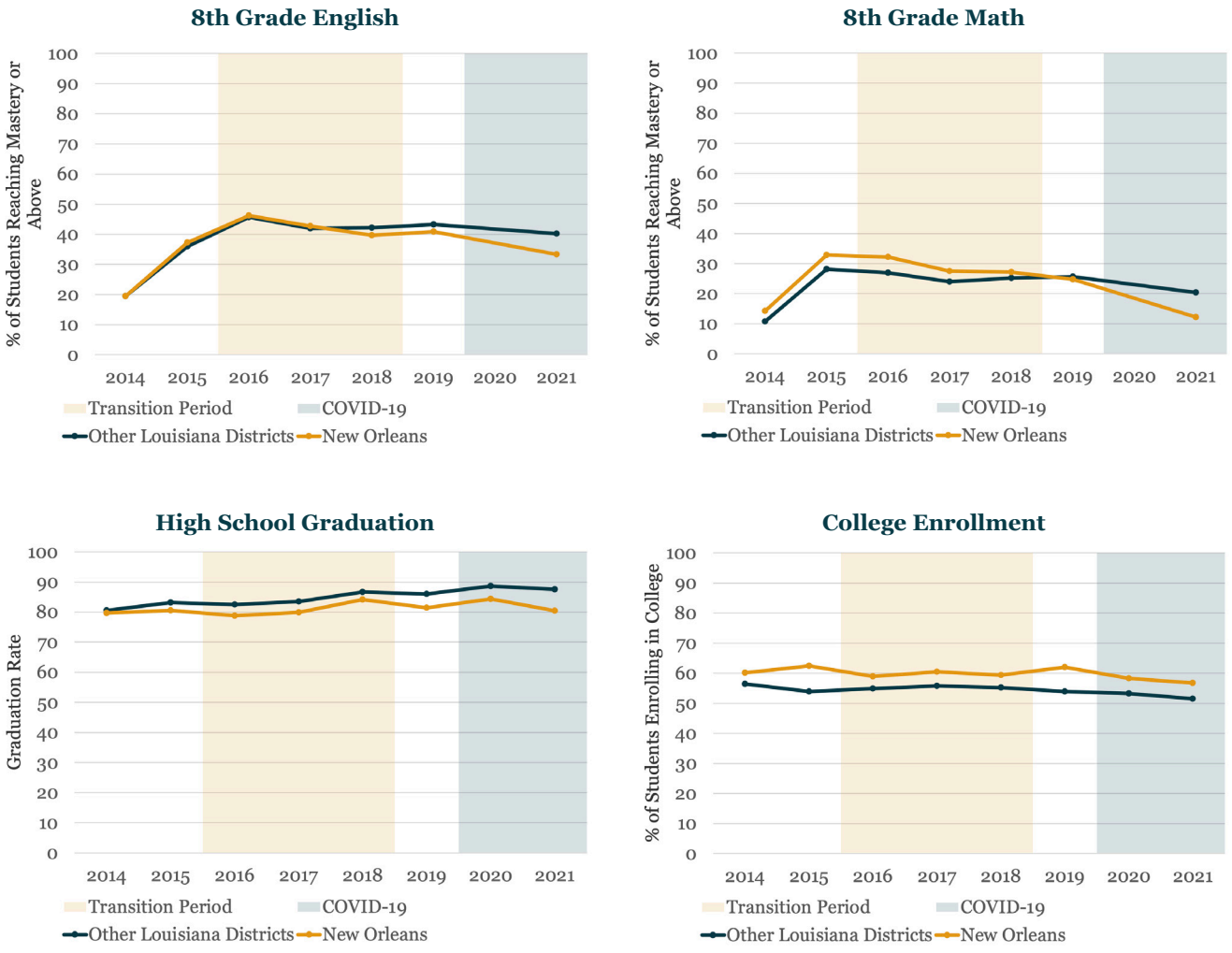
Though we never asked interviewees to comment about NSNO, many of our interviewees talked about the strong role played by the organization. This is noteworthy given the organization's unusual position in the community. While it is common for non-profit organizations to play a significant role in school district affairs, these groups usually represent a clear and specific constituency (e.g., parents, teachers, or business people) or have an official role (e.g., as a paid district consultant). NSNO does not fit into these typical categories.

Prior Improvements in Student Outcomes Have Generally Been Sustained

Did the strain and tensions around governance and leadership of the system carry over to student learning after reunification? To examine how changes in school governance may have impacted student learning and experiences in schools, we compared changes in student outcomes in New Orleans schools before, during, and after reunification to those occurring in districts across the state. The onset of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 presents a significant complicating factor in the analysis; there was only one full school year between the reunification and the pandemic. In addition, that one year was also the first year schools were held fully accountable to new Louisiana performance standards. Therefore, we must interpret the following results with these caveats in mind.

Figure 1 displays the average outcomes for students in New Orleans compared to those in districts across the state. Overall, New Orleans schools during and immediately after reunification had similar test scores and graduation rates as those in districts across the state and higher college enrollment rates. When controlling for student characteristics, we find declines in the percentage of students reaching "mastery" on the state standardized tests in elementary and middle schools but steady high school graduation and college enrollment rates. The largest decline in student outcomes immediately after reunification occurred in 3rd grade English (-5.2 percentage points). We find declines at about half the magnitude for 8th-grade English (-2.1 percentage points) and math (-3.2 percentage points) but increases for 3rd-grade math (+1.9 percentage points) and college enrollment (+4.9 percentage points). These results suggest that New Orleans students did face larger declines in student learning after the COVID-19 pandemic compared to students in districts across the state, but college enrollment rates remained above the state average during this time.

Figure 1: Trends in student outcomes in New Orleans schools during and immediately after reunification were similar to those in districts across the state.



Note: These data represent weighted averages of student outcomes in schools in New Orleans and schools in districts across the state. We do not have test score data for 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking to the Future of New Orleans Schools

In many respects, the New Orleans reforms, including the reunification, have been a real success. The city's publicly funded and governed schools have gone from being near the bottom on every academic metric to near the state average on most, and those gains have generally been sustained. Moreover, all those we interviewed expressed commitment to serving the students of New Orleans going forward.

Still, there are clearly challenges and a key purpose of this report is to bring these to light and try to understand their underlying causes. Some common threads running through our analysis are strained relations and confused roles. This will have to be rectified to support further improvement in the years ahead. Our analysis offers four potential explanations for these tensions that may inform such efforts.

First, we must remember that the state takeover was more generally rooted in distrust of the district and local politics. This is a key reason why the reformers sought to remove the schools from local control through state takeover. While intended to shift the district into a new and more productive role, that historical view of the district and the constraints imposed on the district by the reunification–on district roles and capacity–have made productive relationships difficult.

Second, the reform's origin story, a top-down and forced state takeover amid a horrific tragedy, will not soon be forgotten. Many educators lost their jobs, communities lost the culture of their schools, and some opposed the reforms from the outset. A common refrain is that this was "done to us, not with us." Under these conditions, it may be difficult to reconstruct productive local engagement–more "with us" and less "to us".

Third, we have the unusual nature of the reforms. Unlike essentially every other district in the country, OPSB's roles are mostly limited to charter authorizing, certain coordinating activities (e.g., centralized enrollment), facilities, and funding. Many school leaders and community members expressed a desire for OPSB to do more in a situation where OPSB is designed to do less. The community members we interviewed expected action when they presented their needs and desires to an elected board. The school leaders we interviewed expected not just accountability when contracts are renewed years down the road but also direct support for their schools. However, full recognition of the district's limited roles and resources remains unfulfilled. While the board, and especially the superintendent, have unusually strong authority to close down schools deemed failing, the smaller and more incremental improvement efforts that typify U.S. public education now have to come from the schools themselves.

Fourth, when cities try new approaches, they often have other cities to look to as guides, but the extremely unusual nature of the New Orleans reforms precludes this. New Orleans is essentially the first city to try these school reforms. Other cities have been able to learn from the city's successes and failures, but for New Orleans itself, every decision seems to enter new territory.

Finally, stakeholders had only one school year (2018-2019) to move forward in the reunification and make it effective before the onset of COVID-19. There was little time to build trust in the community before schools shut down, and learning took place primarily online. Now that schools are "back to normal" in many respects, more opportunities exist to find a way to navigate through the competing conflicts and promote trust throughout New Orleans.

All types of school systems have their challenges, but those in New Orleans are different. Since the state takeover is largely over, it is now up to local actors—OPSB, district staff, school leaders, parents, and community groups–to harness their shared commitment, address these challenges, and serve the children of New Orleans well.

How We Carried Out the Analysis

We carried out two main forms of analysis: qualitative analysis of some stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and decision-making prior to, during, and after the reunification of NOLA-PS and quantitative analysis of student outcomes during and after reunification. We discuss these briefly below, with more details in the accompanying **technical report**.

QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE OF STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS

Data included interviews, documents, videos, and other publicly available sources (e.g., newspaper articles) based on a six-year time frame (2013-2020). This time frame marked important events in state and local leadership following over a decade of state control of New Orleans schools under the RSD. We collected publicly available state and district-level information (e.g., meeting and media information, legislative documents, school board meetings and minutes, and charter school applications) pertaining to reunification. Beyond serving as important empirical data sources, documents also helped to identify potential interview participants who were involved or impacted by the transition of power from RSD to NOLA-PS.

We sought to interview multiple stakeholders from the following groups: community organizations, teacher unions, school leaders, CMO leaders, OPSB, RSD, and state leaders. We successfully interviewed at least one person in each category, except for teacher unions. This resulted in 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes, which took place during the calendar year 2022. We asked retrospective questions focused on the period just before, during, and after reunification. For evidence of the initial state takeover, we also relied on prior interviews that **we had previously reported on** news reports and prior ERA research to provide this context.

Our analysis was limited to the stakeholder groups that participated in the study. We recognize that we cannot speak to how reunification impacted teachers and families, other than through participation in school board meetings, and students, other than their academic outcomes. We debriefed the results with multiple stakeholders, including members of our **Advisory Board**, which led to many additional conversations after the first draft was completed and distributed for comment. This process ensured that we accurately captured the New Orleans reunification process and outcomes and present the results objectively and effectively.

The research team also collected and organized OPSB action items from board meetings between 2015 and 2020 to find items related to reunification. Then, researchers watched board meeting video recordings to analyze comment cards, conversations, and actors present in the decision-making process. The research team watched videos of all relevant action items. In addition, newspaper articles were collected from 2012 to 2020 to confirm and provide context for statements made in interviews and board meetings.

QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

To understand how reunification was associated with student outcomes in New Orleans, we examined differences between student outcomes in New Orleans schools overall and those in schools in districts across the state. To do this, we compiled school-level information on student enrollment and outcomes from the Louisiana Department of Education. We weighted the district averages by the number of students within specific grades in district schools (i.e., 8th-grade test scores are weighted by the number of 8th-grade students in each school). We excluded special or smaller districts outside of New Orleans that only include single schools. The student outcomes we examined are the percentage of students receiving mastery or above in 3rd and 8th grade English and Math on the LEAP standardized test, the graduation rate, and the percentage of students enrolling in college the first year after high school graduation. Our first analysis examined the weighted average of student outcomes in New Orleans compared with that of districts across the state. Our second analysis compared year-by-year changes in student outcomes in New Orleans schools to those in districts across the state, controlling for racial/ethnic composition, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and the percentage of students with limited English proficiency.

Related Research

This work builds on a trove of studies we have published, focusing mostly on the state takeover period. Particularly relevant are the studies of the **large effects** on student outcomes–improvements have been generally sustained since the reunification. We have also studied the issue of **economies of scale** that some interviewees mentioned and the **strong role** that accountability played in generating those outcomes. Since reunification, this accountability role has become a point of contention, as many stakeholders want OPSB to shift toward a supporting role.

We have also examined side effects such as the **reduction in arts education** and a small increase in **segregation**. These and other side effects are examples of the problems that some in the community would like OPSB to rectify more actively.