Technical Report

A New First: From State Takeover to the Nation's First All-Charter, District-Governed School system in New Orleans

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Abstract: We study the return of local control, reunification, in New Orleans after the post-Katrina state takeover turned management over to charter schools. Analysis of media reports, school board meetings, interviews with stakeholders, and student performance data revealed how political pressures and strategies shaped the reunification process, how roles and responsibilities of key actors changed, and reunification effects on student outcomes. A group of influential school reformers orchestrated the reunification and successfully maintained the autonomy of charter schools post-reunification. Rather than a simple "return to local control," the locally elected school board was given new responsibilities: charter authorization, accountability, and system coordination as a "portfolio manager." Interviewees reported disagreement about the appropriate roles and capacities of the local district under the new arrangement. School leaders also reported having a more strained and rules-driven relationship with the local district than they had with the state during the takeover period. Despite these and other problems, the substantial improvement in student outcomes from the state takeover have been sustained in the brief post-reunification period. Our analysis outlines both the challenges and opportunities available from locally governed all-charter school systems; and how charter schooling and state takeovers have become entwined strategies.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, a shift has occurred in U.S. education policy when it comes to school governance. Traditional public schools, historically controlled by locally elected school boards, have seen an increased role by state and federal governments through standards and accountability policies. Starting with the early standards movement in the 1980s and reaching a peak under the 2001 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), this "new accountability" has increased demands on schools to improve student outcomes, especially test scores (Smith & O'Day, 1990). When schools fall short on these measures, they are subject to various forms of interventions, including turnaround and takeover (Childs & Russell, 2017; Harris & Martinez Pabon, 2022). These interventions can shift key the governing powers of setting goals and ensuring their attainment from local school boards to higher levels of government.

The sharpest reduction in local control arises when states take over individual schools and entire school districts. The intent of state takeover policy is to motivate education officials to improve academic performance by threatening to take away local governance and power (Welsh, 2019), and taking direct state action to shape goals and improve practices and outcomes. The use of state takeovers has increased since 2010, with about six district takeovers occurring each year (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). The effects of state takeovers of districts on student test scores are, on average null or negative, but they range widely (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). Historically, state takeovers are more likely to occur in school districts serving predominantly students of color and low-income families (Anderson & Dixson, 2016; Harris & Martinez Pabon, forthcoming; Welsh & Williams, 2018; Welsh, 2019; Morel 2018), disenfranchising members of these communities.

Increases in state takeover of school districts has coincided with another change: the growth of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded, privately run schools that operate under a charter or contract through a government authorizer. These schools are granted flexibility and extended operational autonomy in exchange for greater accountability of their performance and outcomes. Their autonomy, over matters ranging from curriculum to personnel management, means that school districts have less control over day-to-day operations than they do over traditional public schools (Lubienski, 2001; Buckley & Fisler, 2003). That authority shifts to the charter schools themselves (or their charter management organization), their boards, the government authorizer, and parents who can enter and exit charter schools without regard to where they live. The overarching theory of charter schools is that this combination of autonomy and accountability leads to improved budgetary and operations management, expanded schooling options for families, and greater innovation (Dallavis & Berends, 2023; Lake, 2008; Preston et al., 2012). Currently, charter schools comprise seven percent of national enrollment with more than a thousand districts having at least one charter school (Chen & Harris, 2022).

When all public schools within a district become charter schools, the management role of the district is largely eliminated, and the governance role shifts to approving and enforcing contracts with charter operators and coordinating system activities. This portfolio management model (PMM) (Hill, 2006; Bulkley et al., 2020) has gained prominence in cities such as Atlanta, Denver, Memphis, Newark, and San Antonio. As with state takeovers, districts adopting PMM also primarily serve low-income students of color (Mason & Reckow, 2017). While typically seen as quite different types of school reform, state takeovers and PMM have an overlapping rationale: that local democratic accountability can produce inefficient bureaucracy that

undermines quality education and provides too few educational options. During district takeovers, state officials can have more operating power, and as it relates to charter schools, charter leaders can have more autonomy, and parents can "vote with their feet" if they are not satisfied with overall improvements. In both cases, school districts and locally-elected school boards end up with less governing power.

One prominent example of this convergence of state takeover and a PMM system has occurred in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina displaced virtually the entire city population, which opened the door for state policymakers to radically transform public education in New Orleans. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana legislature, with support from the governor, built on previous state takeover legislation to allow the state to take over most New Orleans public schools, placing control in the hands of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). The state also leveraged pre-Katrina charter laws to turn all schools under its control into charter schools. In this paper, we focus on the transition from state control under the RSD to the eventual return of locally controlled schools 13 years later, a process referred to as "reunification." Studying the transfer of New Orleans schools from state to local control is important for understanding the impact of governance changes on education outcomes, community engagement, policy development, and equity. As more large districts are either transitioning out of state takeover status and back to local school board control (e.g., St. Louis and Newark) or coming under state control for the first time (e.g., Houston), more research is necessary to understand how these education governance models influence educational systems and opportunities for students.

Prior research on state takeovers has focused on state takeovers themselves (Mason & Reckow, 2017; Morel, 2018; Schueler, Goodman, & Deming, 2017), but limited research has

examined how takeovers, which are supposed to be temporary, end in a return to local control (Morel, 2018). We know little about the state takeovers that do end and how they transfer authority back to the local school district. In addition, while research has noted an increase in charter schools and PMM during state takeovers, these reforms have not been fully investigated in tandem. Our case study of New Orleans education is guided by four research questions: 1) How did reunification change the key roles and responsibilities in New Orleans education? 2) What were the political pressures and strategies that shaped the return to local control in New Orleans? 3) How did reunification impact relationships between key stakeholders and district operations? and 4) How did reunification impact student outcomes? Our analysis of these questions focuses on the years 2012-2020. This includes the years leading up to, and after, the reunification, but stopping short of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current district administration.

Through interviews with state and local education and community leaders about their experiences before, during, and immediately after reunification and analysis of news reports, school board meetings, and student outcome data, we find that while reunification was viewed by many as a simple "return to local control," it entailed creating an entirely new type of school district. The district plays coordinating and compliance roles with respect to school funding, building construction/maintenance, student discipline, transportation, and to some degree special education, but day-to-day management is left in the hands of charter organizations and principals. This structure was the desired end of the state takeover's supporters– whom we call "the reformers." With state control over nearly all New Orleans schools and school buildings, state leaders and reformers controlled the return to local control, shaping the composition of the

local school board and instilling the rules, norms, and expectations of the state takeover into the local district before reunification occurred. Post-reunification, Charter Management Organizations (CMO) and school leaders felt that there was less collaboration between themselves and the district than before reunification while the new, locally-controlled district is trying to determine its role as both centralized support and accountability officer. Tensions persist in the community as well, as some community activists hoped the return to local control would bring back more traditional, community-based schools. We did find that the improvements in student outcomes from the state takeover have largely been sustained through the reunification period, but there is some evidence of backsliding on test scores in the one post-return year (2019) that we can study.

These findings have implications for the future of schooling in New Orleans and other jurisdictions adopting these types of reforms. While the reformers were largely successful in putting their preferred system in place and improving student outcomes, the process and substance of the reforms, and many other non-educational aspects of the post-Katrina response, have contributed to political, racial, and societal divisions that continue to hinder local trust and school improvement efforts. This study offers insights into the factors leaders need to consider during and after state takeover to support the transition to an empowered local district.

Literature Review

An important facet of the politics of education is school (or district) governance, or establishing goals, setting policies, and choosing leaders to guide school principals, other educators, and staff toward these goals. In the U.S., this governance function has been typically left to locally elected school boards. Accountability is an important component of school

governance intended to ensure that schools are meeting the needs of their constituents, are appropriate stewards of resources, and are in compliance with legal and ethical standards.

One of the main objectives of accountability has been to improve the outcomes, such as test scores, that are at the heart of policy's incentives. Early state-driven forms of accountability seemed to raise student achievement (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002), and NCLB did raise high school graduation rates (Harris et al., 2023) and student achievement for some subjects and grade levels (Dee & Jacob, 2011). However, accountability has led to some unfortunate consequences, such as reducing teaching time, teaching to the test, and reducing the time students spend writing and in the arts (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Lugg, Bulkley, Firestone, & Garner, 2002).

While accountability systems have helped numerous school districts by supporting student learning, they have also created a consistent churn of state-led education reform that exacerbates barriers to school improvement (Dixson & Henry, 2013; Henry & Dixson, 2016). Accountability systems may not consider the roles of discrimination, external situations that require additional support, and inequalities in support in school districts struggling to meet benchmarks. In this article, we focus on two such accountability reforms: state takeover and charter schools.

State Takeover

State takeovers of school districts have been used for over thirty years (Steiner, 2005). Thirty-four states have takeover mechanisms and roughly 20 states have taken over schools or districts (Mason & Reckhow, 2017; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021). Financial mismanagement and illegal activity were initially seen as the justifications for takeover (Cibulka & Derlin, 1998; Wong & Shen, 2003). During the school accountability era beginning in the 1990s and increasing with the passage of NCLB, state takeover policies were more often triggered by

failure on academic accountability measures. Through the process of state takeover, state-level government entities take on most responsibilities previously assigned to the local district. Local school boards are either disbanded altogether or have their powers substantially reduced, and a new state-driven governance structure is installed that controls day-to-day operations within the district.

The premise behind takeover is that the district is not capable of improving student outcomes, thus changes in leadership and school operations are necessary. Takeover is also seen as a way to improve the community's trust of district performance and allocate resources and support that will lead to improvement in teaching and learning opportunities. However, state-appointed managers or administrators may have limited expertise in managing large-urban school districts that require navigating complex political and power dynamics. Community members and organizations, families, and educators have differing opinions when it comes to state takeovers (Welsh & Williams, 2018). Educators view state takeovers as intrusive power grabs by policymakers and reformers who are willing to blame teachers and administrators for poor student outcomes. Tension between state officials and district administrators, where each side views the other as incapable of addressing the numerous educational challenges that impact academic outcomes (Schneider & Saultz, 2020), can undermine the policy's ultimate aims.

From an equity perspective, the school districts exposed to state takeover often have large populations of students who are racially minoritized or from low-income communities, impacted by a variety of societal ills that complicate educational processes. District takeovers in general occur in Democratically-led urban areas that educate more Black and Hispanic students, but in states with white, Republican state-level leadership, creating tension between the local community and state leaders (Morel, 2019). Even when considering the achievement level of the

district, districts with a higher population of Black students are more likely to experience takeover (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2021). The logic of reform—in that the district leaders are not capable of improving their schools—often disproportionately labels Black and Hispanic leaders as being "corrupt" and "disorganized" (Osworth, 2022). In state takeover communities, public opinion is also split among racial/ethnic lines; the power at the state level is more often concentrated among white individuals who favor school reform (Morel & Nuamah, 2020; Schueler & West, 2022). Black representation in school leaders decreases because of state takeover, with white leaders taking their place (Morel, 2019). For this reason, state takeover is sometimes considered a type of colonialism, where mostly white state-level actors take power from local Black communities (Morel, 2018; Cahen, 2023). State takeovers in effect remove local democratic accountability from schooling, as locally-elected school boards lose their powers and the community can no longer use their votes to control who leads the district. Although they still vote for state school board and legislative representatives, the power of local communities within state-level debates is diminished.

A recent analysis of the effects of state takeover on student test scores revealed no positive benefits, and some evidence of a decline in student test scores in English 2-3 years after a takeover (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). New Orleans is an exception as it revealed positive effects on student test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment (Harris and Larsen, Forthcoming). However, the New Orleans approach was also unusual and had some other unintended consequences, e.g., de-emphasis on the arts–in a city where these are a core part of the culture (Woodward, 2018). In addition, an education system in New Orleans that was led overwhelmingly by local, Black principals and teachers was replaced with white outsiders (Barrett & Harris, 2015; Lincove et al., 2018; Jeffers & Dixson 2023). More generally, student

achievement, as indicated through test scores, is one of the main reasons for state takeover and main metrics to determine their success, which leads districts under takeover to engage in teaching strategies that focus more on this aspect of student learning, often decreasing attention to the holistic education of students and culturally relevant pedagogy (Royal & Gibson, 2017; Osworth 2022; Welsch et al., 2018).

State takeover is designed to be temporary, and most state laws require the district to return to local control either after a certain time period (e.g., after 5 years) or after the schools in the district have reached financial or achievement-related benchmarks. Overall, there is very little empirical work on the few school districts that have returned to local control. In Pennsylvania, the School District of Philadelphia had a history of academic underperformance that led to a state takeover in 2001. This gave an opportunity for the state to test out market-based reforms, implement a diverse provider model that included for-profits, non-profits, and universities to control school operations (Gill et al., 2007), and create a tiered-autonomy policy that allowed Philadelphia school principals to design their own programs and solely manage their school's operations (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). State control of the district technically ended in 2017, but these new systems remained. The longest-running state takeover appears to have occurred in Jersey City, NJ in 1990 but did not end until 2022. While the school district gained back some areas of governance in 2007, and the initial law requiring the return to local control was passed in 2017, the state had oversight over certain elements of school district performance until 2022. Moreover, the increasing number of charter schools in Jersey City, which took up more than 20 percent of city schools in 2019, are not authorized by the local school district and remain under control of county or state authorizers. These examples highlight the potential link

between state takeovers and charter schools, which we describe more in depth in the next section.

Charter Schools and Portfolio Management Models

The recent increase in state takeovers coincided with an increase in charter school enrollment nationally, from less than one percent in 1990 to around seven percent in 2020. In their analysis of state takeovers, Schueler & Bleiberg (2022) note significant differences in the charter school enrollment share in state takeover districts compared with districts not under state control (7% and 1% respectively) and find some evidence of an increase in charter share in districts after state control ends. In a systematic review of state takeovers, Osworth similarly noted "charter schools have become nearly ubiquitous with takeover policies" (2022, pg. 9). District takeovers in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan, New Jersey, and Louisiana all included an increase in charter schools (Danley & Rubin, 2020). According to a report by the Center for Reinventing Public Education, 52 districts across the U.S. have adopted some level of portfolio strategy, but the districts where PMM has sustained the longest are those that were under state or mayoral control (Hill & Jochim, 2022). The authors state in the report, "Just as a new superintendent or state takeover could fuel the adoption of the portfolio strategy, a change in leadership or end of state control could spell its demise" (pg. 4), recognizing that this market-based reform strategy may only be sustainable under state control.

The functioning of PMM models depends in part on two legal-organizational dimensions: (a) which organization(s) function as the authorizers and (b) which operate as the Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Authorizers are responsible for writing the charters or contracts with the private organizations that operate charter schools and for holding them accountable for meeting those provisions. In the pure form of the PMM, there is a single portfolio manager that

oversees all the schools within its boundaries; this could be the school district, the mayor, the state, or some other entity. However, with charter schools generally, there are often multiple authorizers operating within each jurisdiction. Whether or not these authorizers see themselves as competitors, the existence of multiple authorizers affects the degree to which they can coordinate activities in ways that serve all children in each jurisdiction. The LEA status determines how federal, state, and local funding will be distributed among the district schools and responsibility for special education students, discipline, and other district-level services (Hand, 2016). In traditional school districts, the district is the LEA. Alternatively, every school or charter management organization (CMO) can be its own LEA, decentralizing power further.

Each of these dimensions of legal-organizational issues has significant implications over the power structure of schools in each locality. When charter schools are their own LEAs, they have more autonomy than when the school district is the LEA. Also, when there are multiple authorizers, charter schools have more power because, if one authorizer is stricter, schools can "shop around" and find another authorizer. At the extreme end, where the district is both the LEA and the sole possible authorizer over all its charter schools, the district has powers over charter schools that are like those over traditional public schools.

Urban Regime Theory

To understand the dynamics of takeover and return to local control in New Orleans, we draw on Urban regime theory (URT). This framework describes the relationships between various actors in urban settings, including government officials, business leaders, and community organizations, and how these actors form coalitions or alliances that shape urban policies (Burns, 2003). URT has important implications for understanding the political and economic dynamics of urban areas and how these dynamics shape teaching and learning within urban schools

(Bulkley, 2007). At its core, URT suggests that cities are governed by a complex web of actors and institutions, rather than a single, centralized authority (Whelan et al., 1994). According to Stone (1998), a key component of URT is civic capacity and how various stakeholders are mobilized around a community-wide cause. These stakeholders are often referred to as "regime members," (Mitra & Frick, 2011), and represent both public and private interests. In URT, interest groups negotiate with each other to advance their goals, policies, politics, and overall influence on decision-making (Trujillo et al., 2014). These groups are not fixed but can shift over time as new issues and challenges arise (Morel, 2018).

In urban education, district and school officials, teachers' unions, real estate developers, local government, businesspeople, and community groups, all of whom have different interests and priorities when it comes to education policy, may collectively shape reforms that advance their own political and economic interests (Martinez, 2020). In many cities, corporate interests in education have evolved, pushing for policies such as charter schools and standardized testing (Morales-Doye & Gutstein, 2019). These efforts have often been driven by a desire to improve the workforce, as well as to create a more competitive and market-driven education system that aligns with the ways that businesses themselves operate and conceive their work.

Dynamics between state and local politics play a role in how URT applies to education policies. While accountability laws and curriculum standards are mostly defined at the state level, local school districts determine how they will enforce state laws and support the curriculum within their schools. Disagreement between state and local leaders about educational outcomes and philosophies can complicate this process. When the local government and community share similar goals as the governor and state legislature, state governments intervene

less in local politics and avoid hostile policies, such as state takeover (Morel, 2018). In these cohesive state-local regimes, the state and local governments are mostly aligned under one party and have similar racial/ethnic compositions. When the local community and government's interests do not align with those of the state leadership, a disjointed state-local regime emerges, in which the local communities have less power in state government and are vulnerable to hostile state policies, like state takeover (Morel, 2019). State takeovers often occur in disjointed regimes where a mostly white, Republican-led state government takes over a mostly Black, Democratically-led local school district. By situating the return of local control in New Orleans within urban regime theory, we recognize that the opportunities and challenges of public education within the city are dependent upon a connected group of actors, whose competing interests could have direct impact on the management of the district. In the remainder of this article, we examine the efforts of stakeholders within Louisiana and New Orleans to transition to a locally controlled public school district after a state takeover.

Methods

Our mixed-methods study examined stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and decision making prior to, during, and after the reunification of New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS).[1] Data included interviews, documents and videos, and other publicly available sources (e.g., student achievement scores, enrollment trends, etc.) based on a six-year time frame (2013-2020).

[1] The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) is the locally-elected school board that existed before the state takeover and continued operating a few schools in New Orleans during the state takeover. We refer to the "local district" when referring to governance and management before the state takeover. After reunification, the local district rebranded itself as New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS), with the OPSB serving as the local school board and governance only. We refer to NOLA-PS when discussing the local district post-reunification and OPSB when referring to the locally elected board post-reunification.

This allowed us to explore the transition process of reunification within NOLA-PS while providing boundaries for data collection. This time frame also 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, 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. Using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques to identify interview participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), we conducted 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in 2022 lasting 45-90 minutes with individuals that represent important stakeholders within New Orleans (community activists, district personnel, and school leaders) and within the Louisiana state government (members of political associations, the state school board, and the state department of education). These interviewees were seen as pivotal stakeholders within the overall urban regime within New Orleans. We selected interviewees with knowledge on the RSD and the reunification process and had experience working in or with New Orleans schools. Appendix Table A provides demographic information of each interviewee. All names are deidentified and interviewees are indicated based on their position during the reunification period.

Publicly available data (e.g., board meeting materials and videos, news articles) were used to develop interview questions, triangulate interview data, and provide contextual information on reunification. Specifically, the research team collected and organized Orleans

Parish School Board (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, conversation, and actors present in the decision-making process. Relevant quotes were transcribed. While all relevant action items and videos were watched, not all produced conversation or comments that offered data for the project. In addition, newspaper articles were collected from 2012-2020 to confirm and provide context for statements made in interviews and board meetings, and to capture the media narrative surrounding reunification. Media was collected in summer and fall of 2021 using the data based Newsbank and Nexis Uni. Articles were collected through a combination of search terms like RSD, OPSB, "return to local control", reunification, NOLA-PS Superintendent, unification of NOLA-PS. PDFs of the articles were downloaded for analysis.

We conducted two major coding cycles of the interview, board meeting, and media data using NVIVO (a qualitative analysis software). First, we employed exploratory and descriptive methods to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then employing a deductive analysis, we incorporated focused coding techniques based on pre-established codes from URT and takeover literature (Saldaña, 2009). We identified emerging patterns and themes and when possible, triangulated data in ways that could lead to more nuanced findings. For example, when participants made references to policies, specific events, or stakeholders, we analyzed other data sources (e.g., media, meeting archives, etc.) to clarify facts and examine other perspectives. The team debriefed potential findings at multiple stages of the data analysis process. We also debriefed findings with members of the New Orleans community and other researchers with

expertise in New Orleans, state takeover (and transition), and the sociocultural contexts of education policy.

Quantitative Data and Methods

To understand how reunification was associated with student outcomes in New Orleans, we examined differences between student outcomes in New Orleans schools overall compared with schools in districts across the state. To do this, we compiled school-level information from the Louisiana Department of Education on student enrollment and outcomes. 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 any special districts or smaller districts outside of New Orleans that only include single schools. The student outcomes we examined are the percent of students receiving mastery or above in 3rd and 8th grade English and Math on the LEAP standardized test[2], the graduation rate, and the percent of students enrolling in college the first year after high school graduation.

We used an event study approach to estimate the effects of reunification in New Orleans on student outcomes compared with districts across the state from the 2013-2014 school year to the 2020-2021 school year. We estimated the following equation:

$$A_{it} = \propto + \sum_{r=-m}^{q} \beta_r (NOLA \cdot \mathrm{d}_r) + X_{it}\gamma + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where A_{it} is the outcome of district i at time t, X_{it} is a vector of district-level covariates, including the total number of students in the district and the composition of students by race/ethnicity, economic disadvantaged status, and limited English proficiency. μ_i is a vector of

[2] Reaching "Mastery" on the state standardized exam became the level considered "passing" during the 2012-2013 school year. Previously, students were considered as "passing" if they reached "Proficient."

district fixed effects, λ_t is a vector of year fixed effects, and ε_{it} is the error term. d_r is a dummy of the r years of leads and lags since New Orleans returned to local control. We define the event as occurring during the school year New Orleans completed the return to local control (2017-2018) and use the school year before the beginning of the transition as the baseline (2015-2016). The first full year post-reunification is the 2018-2019 school year. The vector β_r represents measures of cohort-specific effects for schools in New Orleans compared with other districts in Louisiana. The COVID-19 pandemic started during the second school year post reunification (2019-2020) and thus we do not have state standardized test scores for this year.[3]

The New Orleans State Takeover and Conversion to a Portfolio Management Model

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans at the start of the 2005-2006 school year. The hurricane and its aftermath disrupted every element of life in the city. Almost everyone was forced to leave for three months. With local government leaders dispersed around the country and detached from their constituents, and with a heavy role of FEMA and other federal agencies, decision making necessarily became more centralized. No sector was affected as much as education and reopening schools became a top priority so citizens could return and participate in the rebuilding of the city.

Pressure for change in education, and the policy tools to bring about that change, had been building for many years before the storm (Harris, 2020; Lay, 2022). Student achievement, high school graduation, and college-going ranked at the bottom of the state, which itself was second worst in the country. These low academic outcomes in the city were often attributed to a history of financial mismanagement, corruption, and instability within the school district (Harris,

[3] We note that this is not a staggered DD and therefore we do not run into the concerns that have been raised elsewhere. Also, while having only one treated district creates some issues for inference, our prior research suggests that these influences are minor in practice (Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021; Goodman-Bacon, 2021)

2020). However, the schools before the storm had strong cultural ties to the community, made students feel connected and respected (Harris, 2020), and exhibited and promoted Black collective identity and self-love (Jeffers & Dixson, 2023).

Following national trends, the state built a test-based accountability system in the 1990s, long before the federal NCLB required it. The state also passed a charter school law in 1995, which was expanded in 2003, and created the RSD in 2004, allowing the state to take control over individual schools that failed to meet state standards for four years. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, five New Orleans schools that fit these criteria were put under the authority of the RSD and converted to charter schools. These three policies–test-based accountability, charter schools, and the state RSD–all proved critical components in the post-Katrina reform effort.

A group of people, which we refer to as the "reformers," had helped lead these prior actions by the Louisiana legislature and became key actors in the design and implementation of the state takeover. Many interviewees brought up this group with different levels of specificity, describing them as "a handful of private citizens that I would call very influential," "the people who really controlled stuff," "key political actors many of whom are not really in political life," "people with a lot of money and power," a "shadow government," and the people "actually pulling the puppet strings." Leslie Jacobs, a business and philanthropic leader in New Orleans with ties to both the local school board and the state government, was one of these reformers who viewed Katrina as an opportunity to push educational initiatives she had been working towards for years prior. She led the coalition of reformers in the aftermath of Katrina, which included a mix of local, state, and national individuals from inside and outside of politics and education, who all viewed transforming education as an important aspect of the post-Katrina recovery efforts.

Building on the legal framework from before the storm, these reformers worked with the Louisiana legislature to pass Act 35 in the aftermath of Katrina, which changed the criteria for RSD takeovers so that any schools performing below the state average in New Orleans were put under state control (Harris, 2020). Attendance zones were eliminated, the teachers union contract was ended, and all teachers were fired and had to reapply for their jobs. These teachers were labeled as "not-qualified" or "not meeting standard" which led to further distrust, especially among Black teachers, of the education reform efforts taking place within New Orleans public schools (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dixson et al., 2015). In addition, the RSD gained control over the facilities for schools they took over and managed federal FEMA funds to rebuild facilities that had been damaged by the storm.

Act 35 was not a complete state takeover of the district as the local district still governed the 13 New Orleans schools that performed above the state average at the time of the storm. Many of these higher-performing schools that were not taken over by the RSD were academically selective schools that enrolled a higher percentage of white and middle-class students than schools across the rest of the city. The local school board, the OPSB, therefore remained intact, albeit with power over only a few schools. The local school board also pressured these schools to convert into charter schools to enable quick reopening of schools after the storm and to bring in additional financial resources. By the 2014-2015 school year, all of the RSD schools and the majority of OPSB schools had been converted to charters. The power of teachers' unions remained minimal, as collective bargaining had to occur on a school-by-school basis in the all-charter system.

The urban regime in New Orleans changed after the storm as well. The city had a long history of Black leadership in the mayor's office, city council, school board, and state delegation

starting in the 1980s, but that changed between 2007 and 2010. The disproportionate effect the storm had on its Black residents led to higher voter turnout for white residents during this time (Nossiter, 2007; Jeffers & Dixson 2023). The state house in Louisiana has been solidly Republican for decades, but a Democratic governor led the state government during the initial takeover. A Republican was elected in 2008 who served through 2016. The city also elected a white-majority city council and white mayor during this time, transitioning to a white-led rather than Black-led urban regime. This history of the state takeover, the influence of the reformers, the political dynamics in New Orleans, and the policies and practices of the RSD became important elements of the reunification process and outcomes.

Findings

In this section we describe and analyze the processes surrounding state takeover in New Orleans through the following research questions: 1) How did reunification change the key roles and responsibilities in New Orleans? We describe the governance structure post-reunification and compare it with the structure before and during the state takeover. 2) What were the political pressures and strategies that shaped the return of local control in New Orleans? We outline the role of education reformers in influencing the return of local control, and the role politics played in reunification. 3) How did reunification impact relationships between key stakeholders and district operations? We share perceptions from school leaders and community stakeholders about how coordination, communication, and trust post-reunification compares to similar relationships between schools, the community, and the district before reunification. Finally, 4) How did reunification impact student outcomes? We compare student outcomes in New Orleans schools to those in other districts in the state to examine whether reunification affected student learning and achievement.

How did reunification change the key roles and responsibilities in New Orleans?

The main mechanism for changing the roles and responsibilities within the New Orleans education system was through state legislation. Although the presumption of a "return to local control" is to reassign the district the same powers it had before the state intervened, in New Orleans, state law to end the state takeover precluded the district from carrying out its typical pre-takeover functions. Passed by the Louisiana Legislature in May of 2016, Act 91 required all schools under the state RSD to transition their governance to the local school district within two years. By the 2018-2019 school year, the schools previously governed by the RSD and the schools that had remained under the governance of the local district were reunified into a single district, now referred to as NOLA-PS. The law states:

> 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.

The local district therefore lost most of the responsibilities assigned to it before Katrina–and to essentially all local districts nationally, "unless mutually agreed to" with charter school leaders. As one district leader outlined, "Our charter system is unique in that there's certain aspect of the system that the district outsources to our charter friends."

With these duties under the power of charter school operators, what remains for the district? There are four main roles. First is the coordination of the school system, including a centralized enrollment system, common rules and processes for student expulsions, and oversight over students with special needs. Second is facilities, which includes management of school buildings across the district to ensure students attend school in safe buildings with sufficient

resources. Third, the district gained more control over charter authorization and determining what schools would remain open or be closed. Finally, the local district regained the power to raise public funds through taxing and now manages the Systemwide Needs Program, which funds and supports special programs to improve the New Orleans school system, such as teacher training and recruitment. The post-reunification structure of roles and responsibilities continues the structure created during the state takeover. One state leader outlined this structure:

> The New Orleans reforms post Katrina are basically a function of governance, accountability, autonomy and choice or enrollment and those four are interrelated uh, because they are they are meant to sort of, you can't have autonomy if you don't have accountability. You can't have school choice if the resources that are being distributed to every school are done in a manner that it sends people doing the right thing when a school chooses them…the state's intervention to codify all of those things in a statute in 2016 that then returned the school system to local governance was, um, was a major decision.

The return to local control in New Orleans, through Act 91, therefore defined—and redefined—authority along many dimensions, as summarized in Table 1. While NOLA-PS did not regain its power over schools' curriculum, instruction, school staffing, and school services (e.g., transportation and food service), it did regain power over enrollment, funding, charter authorization, and facilities.

It is not just that prior responsibilities shifted across actors but that the PMM system redefined the nature of those responsibilities. One member of an advocacy organization explained, "they're not directly operating schools. They're the authorizer of schools….[they're] really rewriting what a traditional school district's roles and responsibilities would be." It has been common for school districts to decide when and where to open additional traditional public schools, but, under the PMM system, the local district was also encouraged to open schools that looked different from traditional public schools, at least among the menu of options they could incubate and recruit from charter organizations. The aim of diversifying school options was

explicit in Act 91. The district is supposed "to ensure that a diverse system of schools led by multiple high-quality operators exists at all times."[4] The district's responsibilities did not so much grow or shrink as they did shift and adapt.

A 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 ensure that we are compliant with all applicable laws and policies and responsibilities to our authorizer." A community member saw this authorizing power as being limited:

> The school board acts like it has no teeth, which in a way it does not. It cannot tell schools who have autonomy how to run their schools. What it can say is, if you're not law abiding and these are the requirements we have for our children in our city, then we're gonna cancel your charter.

Enrollment is another area that is centralized in the district. The state law required that the system allow students to attend school across the city[5], limiting the potential for neighborhood schools, but the district could control many other aspects of the enrollment system. One of the biggest complaints from parents and community members about the decentralized school system in New Orleans was, and still is, unequal access to high-rated schools. This argument is common among charter school critics, who claim that charter schools only select students who are already high-performing. There is some evidence in the early years of the state takeover that this was happening, which led to the RSD requiring all of their schools to participate in a common application process in 2011. However, local district schools did not originally participate, which meant getting into the academically selective local district schools

[4] This provision also mentions that the school board and superintendent can limit the percentage of schools in the district managed by a single CMO to ensure this diversity of options.
[5] From Act 91: The local school board "shall require all charter schools under the board's jurisdiction to participate in the parish-wide enrollment system and student expulsion process, according to policies established by the board."

was not only challenging academically, but also logistically. Parents had to navigate a complicated system that was bifurcated by school governance (RSD and OPSB) and selectivity (magnet and open enrollment schools) to find a school for their children. One local advocate explained, "The RSD [traditionally-run] schools, they had two-thirds more special ed kids than the charter schools because the charter schools could literally push out the Sp-Ed kids. Now that we're a hundred percent chartered, you can't do that, but what you still see is the schools with the white affluent children do not have children with severe disabilities." Act 91 stipulated that all NOLA-PS schools had to participate in a centralized enrollment system based on parents' stated preferences and restricted the use of geographic preferences.[6]

The differentiated funding formula was key. With the potential for an increase in at-risk students enrolling in and persisting in charter schools across the city, Act 91 also codified differentiated funding that provided schools with more resources to support these students.[7] "We've differentiated that funding formula to ensure that we give money based off the young person that's sitting in front of you and the needs that exist for that young person," explained one district leader. Schools that had at-risk students, including economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities, would receive more funding. These are the kinds of students who were less likely to attend the higher-performing schools that remained under the governance of the local district during the state takeover. Thus, on average, these schools serving more advantaged students received less funding after the differentiated funding went into effect. The requirements to participate in the centralized enrollment system and the financial incentives through the differentiated funding structure attempt to equalize the playing field so that more,

[6] Act 91 states that geographic preferences can only exist for elementary and middle schools and can only comprise half of the seats in each grade level.
[7] Act 91 states that the local school board "shall adopt a policy that establishes a process to determine the district-level funding allocation…based upon student characteristics or needs, as determined by the local school board."

and more diverse, students can have access to the few high-achieving schools in the district. Weighted student funding also aligned with the intent of choice-oriented systems that allow families to "vote with their feet." With weighted funding, that money would follow the student, while also providing incentives for schools to serve higher-need students.

With the return to local control did come more power to raise funds in the local district. While state funding was distributed to schools based on the weighted formula described above, the OPSB can now raise and distribute local tax funds to support centralized services, including facilities maintenance. In addition, they support a Systemwide Needs Fund, which provides funding for programs that the district determines are important for sustainability throughout the system. Currently, this fund supports teaching recruitment and training programs in New Orleans.

In all, the reunification process did not change the day-to-day operations of schools, which remained under the purview of each individual charter school or CMO, nor did it change the roles of the centralized authorities. A state leader claimed, "the major tenants of the New Orleans system, like enrollment, funding, and parent choice we weren't touching…people would have been like 'you're just messing things up.'" The state law did shift power away from the elected school board and centralized power within the superintendent's office. Therefore, while the elected board still chooses who could be hired as superintendent, the new state law fundamentally changed the board-superintendent relationship. Initially, super-majorities were necessary to override the superintendent on arguably the most important decisions under district purview–the approval, extension renewal, or revocation of the charter for any charter school.[8]

[8] The state overturned the supermajority requirement in 2021, but the school board (OPSB) voted to keep it in place as of the writing of this paper.

The elected school board had little power over the day-to-day operation of schools, and this influenced who really had 'control' within the changing New Orleans school system.

For example, 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 how schools choose to operate.

While an end to state takeover suggests a "return to local control," in New Orleans, the local school district did not gain back the powers it had before the state takeover. Rather, it continued the structure created during the state takeover, but moved state powers to the local district. In the next section, we discuss the power dynamics involved in the lead up to reunification and why reunification was designed in this way.

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

Reunification represented a concerted effort to bring under local control the city's fragmented, two-district education system, and aimed to improve cohesion and community engagement in school affairs. The reunification of New Orleans public schools was heavily influenced by power dynamics at various levels within the educational system. The shifting landscape created an opportunity for state and local regime members, including government officials and education reformers, to assert their influence and shape the trajectory of reunification. Decisions regarding governance structures, resource allocation, and community engagement were intertwined with political interests and competing visions when it came to the education of students in the city. Urban regime theory (URT) provides a framework for

understanding how the education reformers leveraged their political power and influence during the reunification process. This framework is critical for understanding the motivations, tensions, and complexities that shaped the educational landscape in New Orleans before, during, and after reunification. URT also highlights the various interest groups, political actors, and stakeholders that either had authority or a supporting interest in the direction of the district. Furthermore, URT can provide insight on the intersection of race and urban governance when it comes to stake takeover and school reform (Morel, 2018). In particular, our findings speak to the importance of state actors exerting influence over urban regimes, even after their official role in a state takeover has ended.

The reformers–most of the same individuals who led the initial state takeover–recognized that state control of New Orleans schools had run its course and moved to control the return to local control just as they had the takeover itself. Passing a law to return the schools under the governance of the RSD to the local district would be a multi-faceted process, but reformers had a strong influence over the outcome of the legislation to ensure the portfolio approach they created remained in place, as well as other policies and practices instituted by the state. State law required that the RSD return control of the schools to the school district, but it was vague about the process, timing, and details. “There was no policy that actually gave way to allow for the unification of schools,” explained one district leader, “so the state had the authority and really needed to create a way for unification to happen.” Reformers worked to ensure that the new rules and norms they had created during the state takeover would be cemented within specific education policies even before the formal process of reunification occurred.

There was limited discussion about reunification until 2010. Coming five years after Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)

approved a plan that would allow schools to return to local control if they were no longer academically failing. But the return to local control was entirely voluntary on the part of charter leaders who still did not trust the school district. Not a single school chose to voluntarily return at this stage. School leaders of charter schools governed by both the RSD and OPSB were uncertain about what reunification would mean for them. According to one OPSB school leader:

> I think there was like concern and fear, which, you know, is always reasonable when you're undergoing a large change. You don't really know what to expect. I think the tension point was that OPSB operated so few schools…there wasn't a ton of people to call to get a feel for, like, what [the reunification] might be like…And so I think that there was just a lot of, like uncertainty about how it was gonna play out and execution.

School leaders were concerned that OPSB would reduce their school's autonomy that they had enjoyed under the RSD. As one school board member relayed, "There was a lot of fearmongering…'The—the district may close your school.' 'They may try to take the autonomy in school. They try to—' You know, and I think this was around…schools and school leaders not knowing…what it was gonna look like or be."

The Shifting Political Winds of Local Control

Throughout the takeover period, legislators, mostly critical of the reforms, crafted and introduced bills to transition the schools back to local control. These efforts did not get very far because the reformers held the cards. Once the city passed the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, a more concerted effort toward reunification began. During the 2015 legislative session HB 166 authored by Representative Bouie, a critic of charter schools, attempted to transition New Orleans schools away from RSD without stipulating any protections for the autonomy of charter schools or restrictions on the role of the district. Pro-charter school board members and advocacy organizations organized lobby days and protest events at the state capital to stop this and similar return to local control bills. One community activist explained "[Leslie Jacobs] has

hella power and nobody wants to piss her off because she'll try to destroy you, and because she has all these favors and everybody owes her money, she can destroy you."

Ultimately, while the bill did win enough support to pass out of committee, it did not garner enough support to reach the governor's desk for final signage. However, one of the supporting votes came from Democratic Rep. John Bel Edwards, who was running for – and soon won – Louisiana's gubernatorial election. His win was significant because he had considerable support from teacher unions statewide, which in turn would influence future education priorities. In addition, the mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, had little influence over the education of New Orleans students, but was supportive of the reforms behind the scenes. His final term was ending in 2018 and there was fear that a new mayor could change the dynamic. The election of Edwards, along with the knowledge that the state superintendent, John White, would soon leave, meant that the reformers would have to begin shaping the reunification process sooner rather than later. "John White was giving them [New Orleans schools] attention, but John White wasn't going to stay there forever," one state leader revealed. An education reformer revealed that BESE "and the state are tired of New Orleans [reforms]. I thank myself every day that we returned these schools." The return to local control was also politically and strategically timed for when state leaders believed OPSB would be ready to operate a PMM system of schools in New Orleans. One state leader stated, "So the biggest fight [we] had passing the legislation, where [we] had to play political hardball, wasn't in the allocation of powers. It was in the timing." As we explain in the next section, it took time for the reformers to instill their rules and norms into OPSB before reunification occurred.

Transforming the Local District—Before Reunification

A key early step toward reunification was arguably aligning the local district and RSD on certain policies and practices. One of the reformers noted, "Part of the reason [we] did the return

of schools the way [we] did is because the schools weren't gonna be returned if OPSB didn't behave right. So, it was the leverage point to make the school board behave right to get the policies in place for the return of schools." To this reformer, "behaving right" meant getting the OPSB to agree to begin operating in ways similar to the RSD, especially in sustaining the PMM model with all charter schools and upholding the policies around funding, centralized enrollment, and discipline that the RSD had developed over the years. An essential part of this process, in the years leading up to reunification, was setting up a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA) that initiated the centralization of enrollment and facilities management across all schools in New Orleans—both OPSB- and RSD-controlled schools. In taking the lead on the CEA, the RSD leveraged its power over facilities, given to them in the initial takeover, to get the local district to require its schools to participate in centralized enrollment. Signed in March of 2014, the CEA created joint bank accounts for facilities management and stipulated that the RSD and local district should share data and work together to determine the district's demographic needs moving forward.

Another policy difference between the RSD and OPSB was in their funding allocation. The RSD adopted differentiated funding for at-risk students in 2007 to ensure schools with more of these students received the necessary funding to support them. As described in the section above, the OPSB schools had fewer at-risk students and thus were not initially supportive of this funding strategy. A state law passed in 2015, only applicable to New Orleans schools, required the RSD and OPSB to decide on one differentiated funding formula for all of their schools. Although there was pushback from a few OPSB academically selective schools who would receive less funding with the new formula, the unified weighted student funding went into effect in 2016.

One state leader explained the importance of these policies for moving forward on local control:

> 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.

State leaders desired to continue policies that had already been implemented in the RSD. With the CEA and funding agreement, these policies and practices around enrollment, funding and facilities were then implemented within OPSB schools and later codified in Act 91.

In addition, the reformers wanted to ensure the OPSB had enough pro-reform members to uphold the PMM system before transitioning the RSD schools to their control. The education reformers quickly worked to recruit and elect OPSB members that would advance desired education priorities and policies. The school board elections, which generally occur during presidential election years, drew more attention, locally and nationally, and grew more contentious in the years leading up to reunification. Local newspapers and organizations alike touted the importance of the 2012 election as determining the future of the charter school movement and eventual return to local control in New Orleans. Charter-friendly city newcomers linked to the post-Katrina reforms, like Sarah Usdin, founder of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) were running against anti-charter, local candidates, like Karran Harper Royal, a local education advocate. Outside money from national school choice and charter school organizations became flooding in for candidates like Usdin, who won the seat in 2012 (Buras, 2015). Money from Leslie Jacobs and other reformers also played a critical role in these elections. A community advocate explained what this outside money means for democratic participation:

> I always make the joke, I wish presidents would wear NASCAR uniforms so we would actually know who controlled them so we could call those people 'cause most of these senators, legislators, and even presidents, they don't represent the people. They represent the companies that pay for their campaigns. Even though this is local politics, it's no different. Leslie Rosenthal Jacobs is the person who was paying for school board campaigns, donating this, donating that. She was the person who was greasing the wheels.

Through financial donations, and other forms of support, the education reformers were able to drive the outcome of local elections to get their preferred candidates elected.

Although the board remained somewhat divided on their views of the next steps for New Orleans education after the 2012 election, resignations and special elections leading up to 2016 created a board that would support what the reformers wanted. A key reason to shape the composition of the board was that the board would pick the superintendent who would eventually lead the reunification of New Orleans schools. This strategy worked. In 2015, the board chose its superintendent, Dr. Henderson Lewis Jr., an education leader who had prior experience working in New Orleans charter schools and sought to unify all charters within NOLA-PS (Hasselle, 2018). A state leader explained the importance of the hiring of Dr. Lewis in starting the reunification process:

> It was like, “Oh, now we have a guy,” like now, there's a guy who says he wants to bring the schools together and is speaking differently about New Orleans than previous leaders or interim leaders, because previously OPSB was still saying things like, “We don't want the schools back. Our schools are better than yours. Like we like the selective schools,” you know, that kind of rhetoric was still in the mix and when, when there was a guy, everyone was like, “Great, there's a guy and we can back out now”...There was now a leader, or who they felt like, was going to be the person that was gonna, you know, take this on so that there was no logical reason to keep the system the way it was. That's sort of like, the momentum that led to finally everyone being like alright, time to transition.

With the norms and policies of choice and school autonomy in place and school board members and a superintendent that would uphold the reforms, the reformers were ready to begin the reunification process.

Instilling the Reforms in Statute

As the political winds began to change, the reformers themselves began to convene and strategize about what they wanted to see in the reunification legislation. In the fall of 2015, *Educate Now!*, an organization started by Leslie Jacobs to advocate for charter schools in New Orleans, convened a group of school leaders, parents, stakeholders, and elected leaders to discuss possible pathways for returning schools to local control. Through this convening, the reformers crafted the framework for a bill that would shift control of schools from RSD to OPSB. One school leader described the work of these reformers as a form of "shadow government":

> There are policymakers that put this structure in place in 2005…Those policymakers are still around, some of them behind the scenes. Some of them are influential thinkers, and though they don't have elected positions, are still in people's ears.

The state takeover was orchestrated in a similar way, with decisions being made behind closed doors without public meetings. The work by the reformers and meetings with RSD and OPSB leaders and state legislators, led to the introduction of SB 432 in the state legislature in March 2016, officially introduced by Senator Karen Carter Peterson (D-New Orleans), a long-time supporter of the reforms. Eventually, SB 432 would pass both chambers of the Louisiana legislature during the summer of 2016 with unanimous support in the state senate and a 54-17 majority with bipartisan support in the house. Rep. Bouie of the New Orleans delegation voted against this bill, but all other members of the delegation voted in favor. With its passage, SB 432 became Act 91 and the reunification was official.

Capacity to Implement

When New Orleans schools came back under OPSB oversight, the organizational capacity of the district was a point of political pressure. Prior to reunification, OPSB was seen as having limited organizational capacity to carry out educational activities. The district lacked the ability to accomplish educational tasks efficiently and effectively, which led many community

members to criticize the district prior to and during the reunification process. In fact, when the state initially proposed to move schools out of RSD control to the OPSB, some community members were vocal about their distrust of the district to do right by students. The return to local control was strategically timed for when state leaders believed OPSB would have the capacity to operate all New Orleans' schools. A 2013 Times-Picayune article, highlighted how, "Given its micromanagement, bickering, focus on matters that don't involve the classroom and lack of a cohesive strategic plan, the school board needs to fix its problems before it interviews a single candidate" (Dreilinger, 2013). Two years later, in 2015, a few months after Dr. Lewis was hired to lead OPSB, and a few months before Act 91 would be signed into law, an editorial further highlighted, "with a new superintendent, a damaged board and a suspect central office staff, OPSB could within a few months more than double the schools it oversees. Even without those challenges, adding that much management capacity would be difficult in such a short amount of time" (Times-Picayune Editorial Board, 2015). There was a recognition that Superintendent Lewis and the OPSB administration would need time to get prepared and leverage the necessary tools to have reunification be successful.

The historical narrative about OPSB according to one reformer was that the district had not done right by kids and lost "the privilege of serving students." However, "once we [New Orleans] started down the path to return to schools, that narrative kind of shifted [and] had to be reconsidered that now if schools are returning to Orleans [OPSB], what does that look like politically, [and] what does their [OPSB] role become." Unlike other state takeovers in the United States, New Orleans' local government authorities, including the City Council and the Mayor, had little involvement in public education. Further, there was a considerable amount of mistrust between the city government and the local school district due to years of corruption and

scandals. These ongoing issues eroded trust in the local government and school district, and called into question what the future of the locally controlled school board could (and would) look like. As one reformer described the government within the city of New Orleans:

> New Orleans has a way of becoming toxic. I don't understand it, but, I mean, City Hall's not well-run… And the school board, no matter [who] we elected [prior to the state takeover], ended up awful. I mean, as in FBI-awful, as in incompetent… I mean we're much, much better than an extremely low bar that we had.

New Orleans' political history is filled with examples of corruption, mismanagement of funds, and lack of transparency that created concern for many state leaders. Coupled with the history of the school board, which one CMO leader described as "dysfunctional," there was a need to reevaluate the political dynamics and the expected role of OPSB. Stakeholders had to grapple with important questions regarding OPSB's position and influence in shaping education policies, governance structures, and decision-making process. Reunification was a complex process and the challenges associated with reshaping an entire city's education system resulted in shifting and newly created power dynamics. One reformer noted that "rewriting what a traditional school district's role and responsibilities are [was] the second big challenges…we're the only district in the country that has 100 percent charter schools…so the two biggies [were] getting the politics straight and then considering what the role is [of OPSB]." Under the RSD, the governance and operational structures changed once all their schools transitioned from traditional public schools to charter schools. Clarity was necessary to consider the OPSB's functions and duties when it came to managing a district composed entirely of charter schools.

It was not just OPSB and RSD that saw changing roles. During the 2005-2015 period, the RSD had worked in close coordination with the non-profit, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). With a board comprised of local education and community leaders, the organization helped recruit teachers and incubate new charter school operators. Once the all-charter system

was in place, NSNO's role evolved and, in some ways, expanded. With the RSD giving up control, NSNO was the main institution organized around maintaining 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.

NSNO hired and was led by many former RSD staff, including former RSD superintendent Patrick Dobard. As a result of this change in leadership, non-profit and private organizations such as NSNO have been spearheading many education policy efforts within New Orleans. As one CMO leader put it:

> I think NSNO has supported significantly on the policy side because of the lack of experience of the current administration 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.

Local entities like NSNO have worked within OPSB to strengthen local teaching and learning policies, leadership pipelines, and improvements in curriculum. 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 districts, 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.

Implementation of Act 91

Act 91 also stipulated the next steps to determine the process of returning the schools to local control within two years. Within only a few months, a unification plan would need to be developed by the OPSB superintendent, in close coordination with the RSD superintendent and a committee whose membership, defined by Act 91, included nine leaders from different kinds of New Orleans schools (RSD charters, OPSB charters, and direct-run schools) and two representatives of education advocacy organizations. One district leader perceived the committee as the state putting additional constraints on the district:

> Really, their presence was to…protect what the RSD created…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.

A critical aspect of developing the unification plan was getting community input, both by allowing for public comment during the four committee meetings and by other outreach. The initial draft of the plan was shared with the community through four public presentations throughout the city, which included over 250 participants discussing their hopes and concerns about New Orleans schools in breakout groups. The plan was guided by five principles–high standards, continued progress, choice for families, ensuring equity, and empowering schools and their communities–which the community provided feedback on.

The final report was presented to and voted on by the OPSB in August of 2016, just in time to meet the September 1st deadline set by Act 91. Whether this plan reflected the community feedback remains an open question. The five guiding principles described above did not change during the process, but the details of their implementation could have. According to a committee presentation, the plan addressed the community concerns that they have control over

as part of Act 91 (accountability, enrollment, special education services, funding, facilities, and collaboration), but not those that are mainly under the purview of charter schools themselves (curriculum, teacher training and recruitment, discipline and culture, open community schools, mental health, and transportation). However, community members voiced concerns about what was and was not covered during the public comment period before the board vote on the plan. While some of them praised the district for allowing for more community input than in the past, others still felt their voices were not being heard, and were concerned that their voices would not be heard moving forward. An issue repeated in community commentary was the autonomy of charter schools and a desire for the elected school board to play a stronger role in the schools. One former educator and school leader explained:

> I have a problem. I participated in the unification meetings in New Orleans East and three main things that were highlighted in our meeting was that of autonomy of Orleans Parish School Board means that you have the ruling, the last say of everything that happens in this particular parish. That charter schools have their own board that were not elected by the taxpayers. Taxation without representation is unconstitutional. Act 91 should be examined and our lawyers should look at the very closely.

The perception by this community member is that the autonomy of charter schools gives more power to the charter school boards than the elected school board, minimizing the power of the community to effect desired changes in schools. School board member Nolan Marshall responded to the remaining community concerns:

> When I was elected, over three and a half years ago, my community said to me, the one thing they wanted was all of the schools back under the OPSB, under an elected board. They didn't want an appointed superintendent from the State to run the district. I can finally say, check and check. Both of those two critical things are happening. I want the community to keep in mind that the bottom line is we get to evaluate and hold the schools accountable… your elected board. That's what you elected us to do, and that's what we intend to do…So everything that you say you wanted, you basically have. Not to the extent you may have wanted, but we are moving in the right direction.

The school board members appeared to recognize that they were not fulfilling all of the community concerns, but felt they were "moving in the right direction." The above description of the board power is slightly misleading, as it is the superintendent and not the board that makes decisions about charter renewal, but otherwise does lay out the changes in governance related to Act 91.

This unification plan became the "bible" for the next two years, determining how the OPSB and RSD would reconcile differences in their operations and OPSB would build capacity to govern all of the schools returning to their control. In the next section, we describe the outcomes of this process.

How did reunification impact relationships between key stakeholders and district operations?

Strained Relationships between School Leaders and the District

From the beginning there was concern about how NOLA-PS would manage all the schools that would be under their control because of reunification and build relationships with school and CMO leaders. As shown in Figure 1, the number of students enrolled in schools governed by the local district more than tripled after reunification. There was a lot of uncertainty about how the school board and local district would use their additional power in this new portfolio system. Furthermore, questions emerged around how the reunification process would change district operations—and thereby shape school operations. There were not many people who had experience running a large school system that had just been given back authority from the state. The balance between offering support to schools and holding schools accountable immediately became challenging, especially as CMO and school leaders who had previously worked closely with the state for years had to navigate new relationships. There was an overall

feeling of less collaboration between the district and school leaders in designing new policies and practices. One CMO leader explained:

> We've always been able to say to the State, "Hey, how are you evaluating us? Where's the rubric? What do you want us to do? How do you want to do it?" The district acts like they are coming in for a gotcha…It's stuff like this that it's so traditional district. I think this is the stuff that traditional people see in districts, and we don't need to have this kind of adversarial relationship. Many of us feel like we helped found this district. It's disappointing, but it is what it is. I don't know. We're trying to get along.

This and other CMO leaders felt the local district was still trying to figure out what it means to manage a portfolio district of schools, some even citing that they wanted *more* centralized services than prescribed by Act 91. One school leader thought that the district was not "putting in full effort" and providing services that could support the operations of all schools across the district, including food services, insurance, and transportation. The autonomy that comes with an all-charter system requires schools and CMOs to negotiate their own contracts for services, when the district could potentially help to negotiate better rates for all of the schools in the district. One school leader explicitly mentioned building on the "economy of scale" to support charter school leaders in being better able to afford the services required for all district schools. For example, New Orleans schools are required to provide free transportation options for all of their students and transportation costs continue to be one of the largest non-salary 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.

Perception around the lack of collaboration and strained relationships influenced district-level decision making. According to one of the reformers: "one of the biggest challenges is the lack of trust between the charters and NOLA-PS…[charter leaders] feel [the district is]

weaponizing information." One school leader reinforced the importance of their anonymity in the interview because they feared the district may retaliate against them for sharing their opinions. Another school leader claimed, "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 their policy-making process, but school leaders still felt like their voices were not being heard and did not feel supported by the district.

In closure and facility decisions, the lack of trust and transparency appears to be the strongest. CMO leaders claimed the RSD would consider their needs and plans for expansion when making decisions about where to site schools. There was a perception that NOLA-PS was making these decisions without considering how new competition or expansion will affect the operations of current CMOs. 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.

Part of the perception of having a less collaborative relationship with the district than in the past could stem from declining student enrollment. While enrollment in New Orleans schools was steadily increasing from 2008 through reunification, it started declining just before the time of our interviews in 2022. While the RSD's initial role was to quickly open schools to accommodate increasing student need as families were able to return to New Orleans post-

Katrina, the local district now is having to “right-size” the district and close under-enrolled schools. As one district leader described:

> We don’t have enough kids in New Orleans. You open a new charter operator. They literally can’t fill their seats. The system got too diluted. I think that adds some authorizing pressure ‘cause it makes it harder to, I think, to do interesting things or bring new folks into the fold.

The uncertainty about difficult decisions may be exacerbating the other challenges that have emerged from the reunification.

Declining enrollment may also lead to financial liability associated with maintaining historic school facilities across the city and affect decisions about where schools are sited, when schools move, and which buildings are closed. After Hurricane Katrina, many school buildings under the governance of the RSD were updated or replaced using FEMA funds, but there are still old school buildings in need of repair across the city. One charter board member highlighted this issue:

> a lot of schools after Katrina were rebuilt, and they're beautiful. And the newer schools that have all the bells and whistles and, you know, they look great and then they're-they're not gonna have to update big equipment, but then we have this great school with these high achieving, motivated students and our facilities are really outdated, you know.

Although school leaders felt that this process was more collaborative with the RSD, community members did not feel that the RSD process was transparent or fair. NOLA-PS district leaders knew from the start that they needed to have a process in place to ensure the public and charter school leaders felt like they had a say in the process and that the process was fair. As one district leader put:

> Because you want Valena C. Jones 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.

During school board meetings, community members were most vocal on issues of school sites/facilities. When OPSB moved to vote on developing a site, or moving a school from one building to another, community members would show up to school board meetings, citing the building's history or the building's meaning to the community. Decisions without communication or transparency, or decisions that appeared to perpetuate historical patterns of racialized exclusion received the most public outcry and scrutiny. At one school board meeting in 2019, Ashana Bigard, a community activist, spoke to the board about a perception schools run by larger CMOs received preference in OPSB facility decisions:

> My issue becomes, it seems like the schools are only renovated, well it has seemed like, the schools are only renovated when they are going to certain [CMOs], right? So, when I look at charters, people who have individual charters, a lot of times they're not getting access to that capital as quickly...I just need for us to have a more transparent process because we had, you know, the children at Lafayette [school] sitting in asbestos for three years while we are sitting on millions and millions of dollars of capital project funds.

Differences in perceptions of collaboration and trust between school leaders and the district also relates to how the RSD and NOLA-PS approach their missions. The state leadership had a mission to rebuild a school district after the storm as quickly as possible and to transform what we think of as public education. As one school leader explained:

> I don't think any more we all believe the same things about what we're doing. When we had the RSD, it was founded under certain principles, right? It was turn around, saving a building, preserving what was in the building, building a school for children…The subtext there is the adults were wrong, right? Not the kids….The principles behind what we did as an RSD were really clear, and we brought a couple of those principles to the whole district. Now…the district because it's local, because it's not founded on principles, because the people who run the district have to think about their job or decide to think about their job as managing constituencies and not managing a set of principles.

Various interviewees mentioned, for example, that the RSD focused on providing equitable access to high-quality schools. This is reflected in the RSD's pre-unification push for centralized enrollment, required bus transportation, and differentiated funding (i.e., providing more funding

to schools serving disadvantaged students). The unification plan developed by the OPSB did have similar principles laid out, but some of our interviewees did not feel the district policies and operations reflected these principles.

This lack of clarity on mission may be a natural consequence of coming under the direct governance of an elected board. Boards are comprised of diverse members and decisions are reached by majority-rule and compromise. The RSD also fell under an elected board (BESE), but, as this was at the state level and had many responsibilities beyond the RSD, the RSD superintendent operated with more autonomy. It is difficult to establish a clear and consistent set of principles under these conditions. Without a clear vision of the roles of school leaders and district leaders in the PMM model in New Orleans, it leaves confusion about how and why decisions are made. The lack of trust, transparency, and collaboration can be tied to missing a shared understanding of mission, vision, and purpose.

Tension Between the State and Local District and the Community

Another implication of the reunification was ending the direct line that charter leaders had to the state and state policies. During the state takeover, charter leaders regularly met with the RSD superintendent, a state employee who coordinated closely with the state superintendent and BESE. This apparently allowed the RSD to shape state policies in ways that benefited the city's schools. As one district leader explained: “Whatever initiatives I feel that were being pushed down from the state, it was made with RSD in mind… The scores in New Orleans was driving how other school districts’ performance probably got inflated. ’Cause then, when unification happened, ironically, there was no longer a curve”. The “curve” this district leader is referring to was implemented during the 2012-2013 school year as the LDOE transitioned to more rigorous standards aligned with the Common Core. The LDOE changed the standard for

"passing" state exams from basic to mastery during the 2012-2013 school year but implemented a "curve" on schools' assigned letter grade to allow schools to adjust to the more rigorous standards. This adjustment applied to all schools in the state and lasted until the 2016-2017 school year, the last year the state governed schools in New Orleans. Speaking to this change, one CMO leader described how being under local control has given them less power in influencing state policies:

> In a couple years, it's gonna get even harder to—a C is gonna be five points harder to get, and the test keeps getting harder, and we're in this situation, and we actually can't legislatively enact any changes now. It's a little bit of a tricky situation. It's almost like when we were in RSD, we probably could have affected more change because there was more ownership there.

The "ownership" the CMO leader is referring to is the state's ownership and interest in the success of the New Orleans school reforms.

A related implication was that charter schools became detached from the information flow between the state and schools. States regularly change policies and practices that impact schools and, under the RSD, there was a direct line of communication about these changes. One state leader noted a need, in the post-takeover period, for the local district to act as a liaison between the state and charter schools on state policy conversations. School leaders, in contrast, commented that they felt left out of discussions with the state, reinforcing the disconnect over the roles the district should play.

The same state leader said that the local district also had a key role to play as a leader in conversations with other city government and philanthropies around citywide needs, such as truancy. 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 the charter schools, when

the district had limited authority over day-to-day operations. We can view these liaison roles as being part of the district's larger responsibility for system coordination.

The difficulties in the state-local relationship have also extended to the state legislature. While Act 91 was a bipartisan bill, it did not have the support of one staunch charter school critic in the New Orleans delegation in the state house, Rep. Bouie. Since reunification, now Senator Bouie, has filed bills to increase the power of the OPSB. One state leader described this tension:

> And right now I would say the legislative delegation is sort of hostile to the Orleans Parish School Board… I think the New Orleans delegation would like to see more traditionally run schools, and are frustrated the Orleans Parish School Board has...so far…has not opted to do it. There's nothing stopping the Orleans Parish School Board from operating traditional run schools, but they have chosen not to.

While the state law does preclude the school district from reinstating geographic boundaries for schools and it requires that they uphold the autonomy of charter schools, there is no language that stipulates that the district cannot choose to open direct-run schools.

While this appears to be a tension with the state legislature, it stems from differences in opinion between the community and the district in the effectiveness of charter schools and the desire of some community activists to have more community-based, traditional public schools. Although positions elected by similar constituencies, school board members and state representatives appear to have differing opinions about how to address challenges in the school district and how to address community feedback and desires. A school leader outlined this tension as well:

> Whether or not, um, charter schools would be better or worse than a traditional school system. Whether or not charter schools are living up to expectations and doing right by kids, and so I think that that has become, sort of, very like contentious piece of the political environment around, you know, whether or not you are pro or against charter schools. I think that that, you know, will remain a political-tension point.

Community members reiterated these sentiments in interviews and in school board meetings. There is still a trauma of residents in the city that feel the state takeover and transition to charter schools was all done *to* them and not *with* them. According to one school leader:

> I think that there's a feeling that post-Katrina, um, some powers-that-be made the decision that we were going to go charter, and that that decision was just, like, executed on people lost their jobs, charters were issued, schools were taken over, and that there had been no community involvement in that decision.

After many years of community members post-Katrina trying to have their voices heard in schooling decisions, they are tired. One community activist explained the relationship between NOLA-PS and community post-reunification as "nonexistent":

> Parents and students and community have been letting their voices be heard for a long time. They've been asking for things from the beginning of this process. It was simple things like we want all the children in the City of New Orleans to learn how to swim because Hurricane Katrina happened. We had more than 5,000 people die because they did not know how to swim—to just wanting the students in our schools to have technology classes, just innovation, things like that…Almost everything that the community asked for they didn't get….We can make noise all day, but who's holding schools accountable to listen?

The local district did have processes in place to collect that type of feedback. There just seemed to be disagreement about what schools should be doing.

There were hopes that reunification would bring an end to the charter school movement and bring more direct-run schools to the district, and community members are dismayed that the school board has continued to uphold their role mainly as a charter authorizer. One community member voiced this during a school board meeting in 2018 that included the first recommendations for school closures post reunification:

> 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]?

In the end, the effect of the return to local control depended substantially on who got elected to the local board; and the board simply did not support the views of some community members. In 2020, all of the board seats were up for election in competitive races, creating a potential opportunity for changes in how the board governed NOLA-PS. As with prior elections, funding poured in from outside organizations and reformers, who supported incumbents and pro-charter candidates. In all but one seat, these candidates won, solidifying the pro-charter board who would select the next superintendent and govern the school district for the next four years (Jewson, 2020).

How did the transition impact student outcomes?

To understand how the change in governance affected student outcomes, we examined student test scores (% of students reaching "Mastery"), graduation rates and college enrollment rates from before and after reunification in New Orleans. Using an event study approach, we compared the changes in student outcomes among students in New Orleans schools to those in districts across the state. We used the year prior to the passage of Act 91 (2015-2016) as a baseline and analyzed whether changes in the outcomes for students in New Orleans schools were significantly different from changes in outcomes for schools in districts across Louisiana during reunification (2016-2017 and 2017-2018) and after reunification was complete (2018-2019). We also examined how these trends changed after the COVID-19 pandemic began, but we do not have test scores for 2019-2020 because the state canceled their administration. The estimates from these analyses are available in Appendix Table B.

Figure 2 displays the event study results for test scores and Figure 3 displays the event study results for high school graduation and college enrollment. We do find some evidence that the trends in New Orleans schools were significantly different from those in Louisiana before the

baseline year; on average New Orleans schools had higher 3rd grade English and math test score passing rates, graduation rates and college enrollment rates than schools in districts across the state. During reunification, there were declines in 3rd grade English test scores. Immediately after reunification we also find declines in 8th grade Math and English, but an increase in 3rd grade Math. We find no significant differences in the graduation rates during and after reunification in New Orleans schools compared with schools in districts across the state, but we do find evidence of an increase in college enrollment rates. All student outcomes for students in New Orleans, except for college enrollment, declined more steeply after the COVID-19 pandemic hit than for students in schools in districts across the state.

Discussion

In our work, we sought to understand the reunification of New Orleans schools, and the return of local control after a period of state control of the local district. New Orleans might seem like a unique case, but we find that it fits the same pattern of other state takeovers in three dimensions. Like other district takeovers over the past two decades, this one was targeted to districts serving mostly low-income students of color and it came with: (a) a rise of charter schools–partially reflecting the fundamental similarity between these two policies; and (b) seemingly permanent modifications in local governance. State takeover, in New Orleans and elsewhere, has apparently come to mean, not a temporary intervention to get things back on track, but a permanent change in schooling.

State and district actors influenced how reunification would be implemented, and our paper revealed that political and power dimensions were critical for shaping the overall education context in New Orleans after state takeover. Using URT to understand the power dynamics and decision-making in New Orleans, we found that while it was almost inevitable that

the state would restore local control back to OPSB in some fashion, reformers were able to exert considerable influence on the timing and direction of reunification. During the takeover period, the reformers had built a PMM model in which school leaders accepted accountability for results but with autonomy over how to reach those objectives. The new district role in this arrangement entailed acting as the authorizer and fulfilling the accountability function, coordinating system activities (e.g., enrollment), and providing schools with resources and facilities. They also gradually brought the local district along in adopting similar approaches, culminating in the passage of Act 91 that turned control over this model to OPSB.

The new system created strained relationships between school leaders, the community, and the school district. School leaders, while valuing their autonomy, still seem to want the district to play more proactive, supportive roles that are standard in traditional school districts, but which are deliberately omitted from its official roles in a PMM model. NOLA-PS had neither the inclination nor the capacity to carry out some of the functions school leaders asked for. Once the portfolio manager became the locally elected board, the school-authorizer relationship was also guided more by rules than informal collaboration or clear principles. This combination of disagreement about the appropriate district roles and the shift to a rules-based approach, as well as the history of widespread distrust of OPSB, strained the school-district relationship.

These difficulties do not yet seem to have had a clear impact on student outcomes. We see some small declines in test scores but increases in college-going. It is too early to tell whether the return to local control, with the district as the sole portfolio manager, has been effective in any sense. The district only had one year to address the strained relationships and other challenges before COVID-19 set in. A new NOLA-PS superintendent took office after the time of our analysis.

Important questions remain regarding the future direction of NOLA-PS in this post-reunification world. Despite this new form of local control of New Orleans schools, structural challenges remain. Poverty is an influential factor as it relates to educational opportunities and advancement in New Orleans (Henry, 2021). Poverty negatively affects a student's educational trajectory, including high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment. Poverty also exacerbates existing opportunity gaps and limits students' access to advanced courses, extracurricular activities, and enrichment programs. Addressing poverty in NOLA-PS would require a multi-faceted approach that involved collaboration between school, city, and state agencies. However, years of distrust, mismanagement, and differences in political and operational directions has created a tension that has affected New Orleans' comprehensive efforts to tackle poverty (Fields, 2019).

Although a Black-led urban regime exists in New Orleans now, with a Black mayor, Black superintendent, and Black-majority city council and school board, the power dynamics between the community, leaders, and state are still disjointed. The local government and district have taken a hands-off approach to the schools, leaving most decisions left to the CMO leaders and charter board members, who are unelected individuals who mirror the education reformers that orchestrated the state takeover and PMM models in New Orleans–white, elite outsiders with more connections to the business than education community. A Democratic governor's term is expiring within the next election cycle, and a Republican was recently elected to take his place which could lead to the expansion of vouchers and school choice throughout the state. These dynamics mirror those of the state takeover in Newark, which led to an increase in charter schools despite community objections (Morel, 2018).

Although unique in its universal application of charter schools in the PMM model, New Orleans was not unique in its adoption of a charter-driven, market-based strategy as part of a state takeover. Charter schools tend to proliferate in districts undergoing state takeover (Osworth, 2022; Schuler and Bleiberg, 2022). Whether the increase in state takeovers and charter schools coincided because of separate forces or whether these reforms are inextricably linked is an open question. But it would not be surprising to see such an effect. The political discourse around charter schools and state takeovers does include similar motivations and supporters (Mason & Reckhow, 2017; Welsh, 2018). In some states, state-level boards control both state takeovers and charter authorization, removing power from local districts in when, where, and what charter schools open. In New Orleans, most of the charter schools running in the local district were originally approved by the state board, but reunification moved their charter contracts to local district control. From interviews with reformers during and after the state takeover in New Orleans, we know that the original intent of the state takeover was to convert schools into charter schools (Harris, 2020), directly linking these two reforms. In Tennessee and Georgia, state takeover laws also explicitly mention the expansion of charter schools as potential remedies for low-performing schools (Welsh 2018). Future research examining state takeover effects should consider the role of charter schools in the academic outcomes.

This overlap in adoption of takeovers and charter schools is not surprising given their shared rationale: both remove power from the local school district, as well as teacher unions, in the operations of schools. Beliefs about corruption, mismanagement, and unwieldy bureaucracy within traditional school districts drive this rationale. Both school reforms were political decisions that shifted the operations of schools, given that the only educational leaders who are elected representatives in most districts are members of the local school board. However, this

also takes away some power of voters to change the way the district is run. In a state takeover, the main power of the public is in electing their state representatives, but the delegations for urban areas may not have power in the statehouse to make any desired changes. In a portfolio model of schools, the main power of the community is in choosing the schools they want their children to attend. Community voices are essential in designing schools that fit the needs of the families in the area, but there are few mechanisms for all voices to be heard in school reform efforts.

As state takeovers and portfolio management models become more common across the U.S., it is important to recognize the legal, political, and local issues that are unique to each community. As research has found, neither of these reforms uniformly work across all contexts (Schueler and Bleiberg, 2022; Chen and Harris, 2022). New Orleans is a mid-sized city that experienced a traumatic event that shaped everything that happened afterwards. It is a blue dot in a mostly red state with a majority black population and high poverty and crime rates. Its economy rests on tourism and the culture that the Black community has developed and grown for decades. Other cities without this same structure may not experience education reforms in the same way. For example, Houston is currently undergoing a state takeover, and many believe charter school expansion will be a part of the process. Houston is the 4th largest city in the U.S. and the largest city in Texas, with more than three times the number of students as New Orleans. As the state decides how to handle the governance and management of schools in Houston, they may look to the takeover and reunification process and the portfolio management model in New Orleans, but they should also listen to the community and consider the unique circumstances in Houston Independent School District.

Our analysis is limited to the stakeholder groups that participated in the study. We were not able to include the perceptions of stakeholders that include teachers' unions, state and district leaders, or other community groups that did not respond to our requests for interviews. We focused on recruiting the state, district, and school leaders that were most impacted by the change in district governance, but 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.

The racialized nature of New Orleans public education reforms should not be ignored. The state takeover itself, and therefore this form of reunification, likely would not have happened if New Orleans had been a majority-white district. Some rural, white districts in the state had performed just as poorly as New Orleans, but were never subject to the same interventions. And some of what we call "school performance" in New Orleans was a function of structural racism in the form of white flight, redlining, transportation inequality, or unequal access to healthy food and water, and inequities in resource distribution (Noguera & Alicea, 2020). Moreover, the state takeover was also led almost entirely by white leaders and opposed by the New Orleans majority-Black delegation in the state legislature. While local Black leadership grew substantially as the reforms went on, including in the reunification, the origin story of the state takeover remains.

In employing urban regime theory (URT), this study highlights the influence and political power of education reform leaders on shaping urban education after a state takeover. The "coalition" promoting New Orleans education reforms leveraged state legislative and political pressure to return schools to local control and shape the overall authority (and autonomy) of OPSB. Opposition to the reforms was relatively weak, because part of the reformers' objective

was to weaken the teacher's union and use measurable results (i.e., test scores and graduation rates) during the period of state takeover to build support for reunification. URT illuminates how the education reformers at the state level found local individuals and groups aligned with their interests to develop a shared policy agenda around reunification. URT also highlights the dynamics underpinning the development of political arrangements that advanced and sustained this agenda. Although the state takeover of schools in New Orleans ended, it was accomplished through upholding the policies and practices implemented by the state and designing a local district with little power over teaching and learning in their schools.

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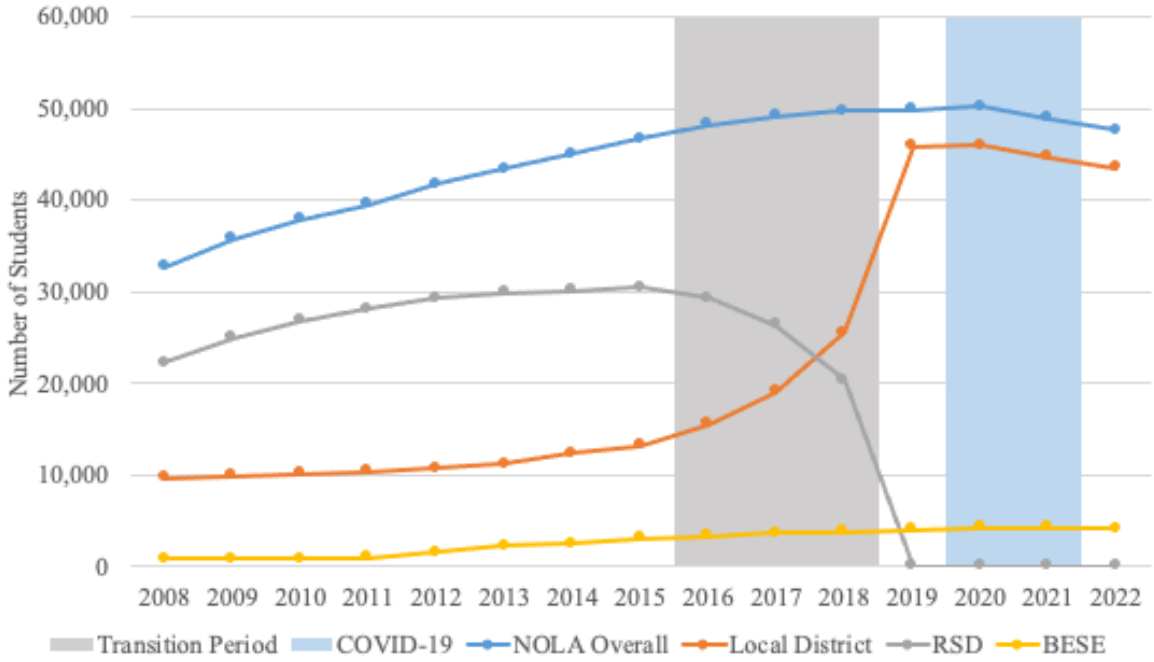
Table 1: Changes in Roles and Responsibilities of State and District Leaders Before the State Takeover, During the State Takeover, and After Reunification

	Before State Takeover	During State Takeover	After Reunification
Enrollment	OPSB assigned students to schools based on their geographic location, except for charter schools that accepted students across the city.	The state legislature eliminated geographic enrollment zones. RSD operated a centralized enrollment system for all of the schools under their governance.	NOLA-PS operates a centralized enrollment system that all schools are required to participate in.
Governance	Local	State	Local
Curriculum & Instruction	OPSB provided guidance on curriculum and instruction to their direct-run schools. Charter schools had autonomy in instructional materials.	CMOs and charter schools had autonomy in determining the materials they use in instruction and how they assess students.	CMOs and charter schools have autonomy in determining the materials they use in instruction and how they assess students.
Governance	Local	School	School
School Staffing	OPSB handled all human resources and staffing decisions for their direct-run schools. The district had a collective bargaining agreement with the teachers union.	Charter schools and CMOs made their own staffing decisions. The local district handled all human resources and staffing decisions for their direct-run schools. There was no collective bargaining agreement with the teachers union.	Charter schools and CMOs make their own staffing decisions. Individual CMOs and charter schools can sign on to agreements with the teachers union.
Governance	Local	School	School
Charter Authorization	The state school board made charter contract decisions for the 5 RSD charter schools. The OPSB approved their one charter school.	The state school board made charter contract decisions for RSD charter schools. OPSB made charter contract decisions for their charter schools.	Charter contracts are made with NOLA-PS. The superintendent makes charter decisions, which can only be overturned by 2/3 vote by the OPSB.
Governance	State/Local	State	Local
Facilities	OPSB managed all of their facilities for schools across the city.	RSD managed the facilities for schools under their control. The local district managed the facilities for schools under their control.	NOLA-PS gains management of all facilities, except for those still being renovated with FEMA funds.
Governance	Local	State	Local

Funding	State taxes went to OPSB according to student enrollment. OPSB had the authority to determine the use of these funds and those raised by local taxes.	State taxes went to RSD schools based on student enrollment and characteristics. OPSB distributed funds to their schools based on student enrollment.	State taxes go to NOLA-PS schools according to student enrollment and characteristics. NOLA-PS has the authority to raise local funds for centralized services, such as the Systemwide Needs Program.
Governance	Local	State/Local	Local

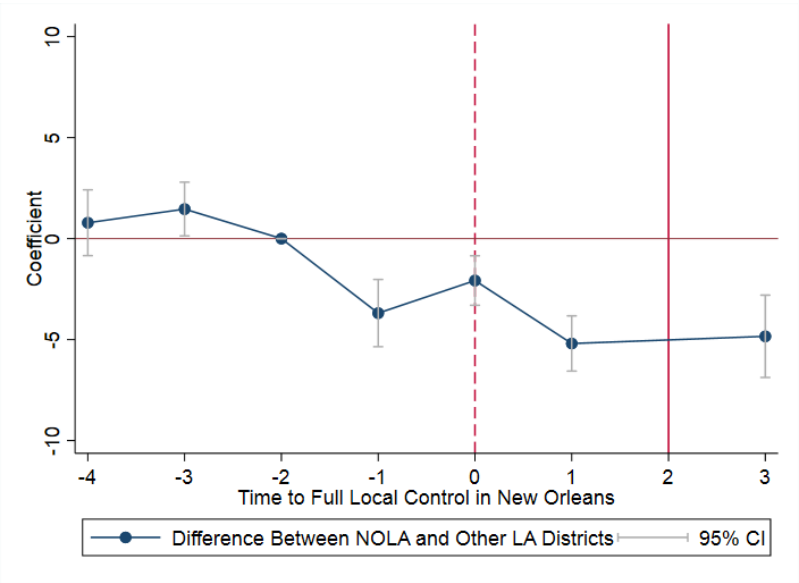
Figure 1: Number of students enrolled in K-12 schools in New Orleans overall and by governance, school years 2007-2008 through 2021-2022



Note: School years listed represent the spring of the year (i.e. 2007-2008 is represented by 2008). RSD schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Recovery School District within the given school year. Local District schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board or NOLA-PS in the given school year. BESE schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. NOLA schools include all publicly funded schools in New Orleans and sums of all of the other categories. The transition period indicates the time period when schools were beginning to transition from RSD to the Local District (2016 through 2018). COVID indicates the school-years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

Figure 2: Estimates from event study analysis of the differences in math and English test scores for New Orleans schools compared to schools in districts across the state

A. 3rd Grade ELA % Mastery or Above



B. 8th Grade ELA % Mastery or Above

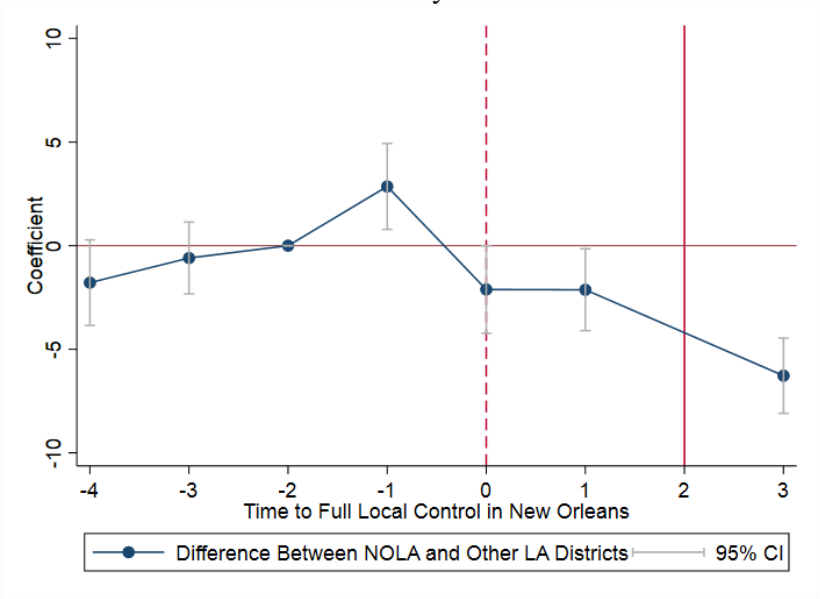
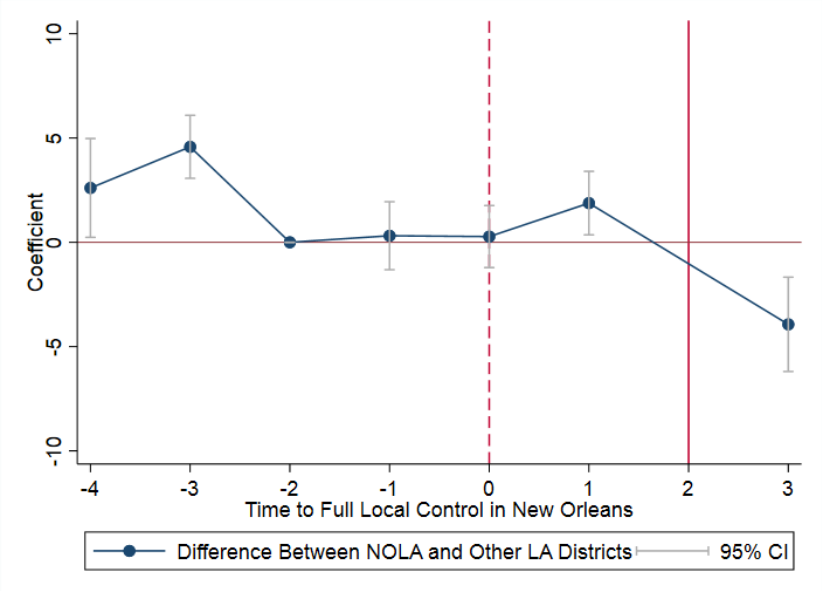
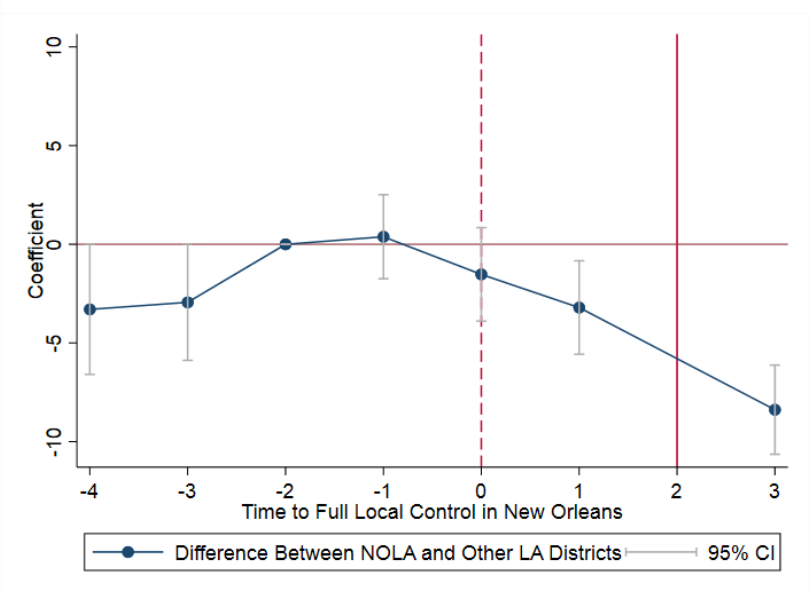


Figure 2 [Continued]:

C. 3rd Grade Math % Mastery or Above



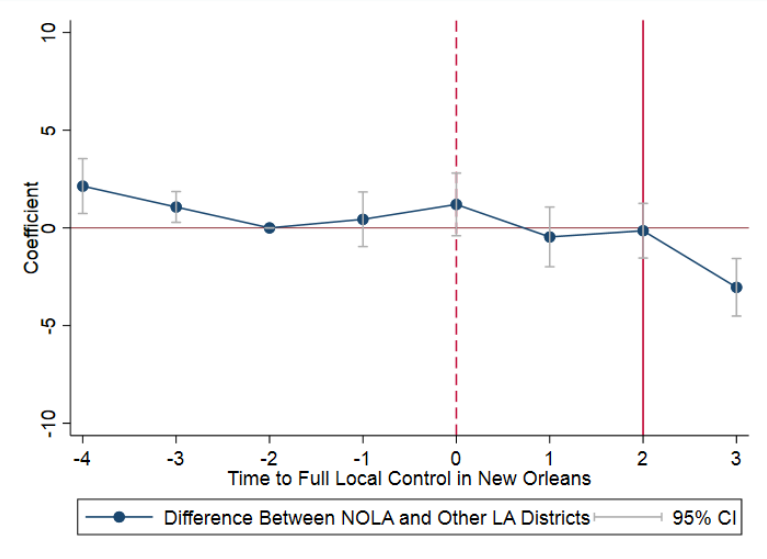
D. 8th Grade Math % Mastery or Above



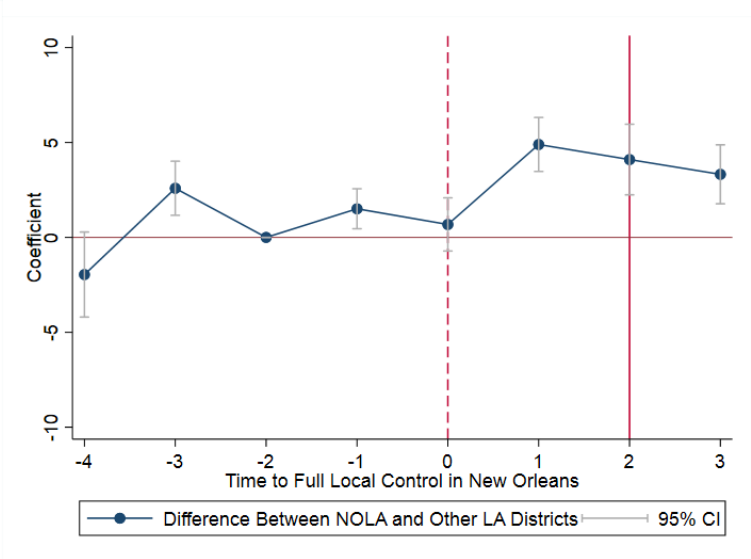
Note: Time 0, represented by the dotted vertical line, is the completion of reunification in the 2017-2018 school year. Baseline is the 2015-2016 school year, two years before the completion of reunification. We represent COVID-19, two years after reunification, by the solid vertical line. There are no test scores available for this year (2019-2020).

Figure 3: Estimates from event study analysis of the differences in high school graduation and college enrollment for New Orleans schools compared to schools in districts across the state

A. High School Graduation



B. College Enrollment



Note: Time 0, represented by the dotted vertical line, is the completion of reunification in the 2017-2018 school year. Baseline is the 2015-2016 school year, two years before the completion of reunification. We represent COVID-19, two years after reunification, by the solid vertical line.

Appendix A: Information about Interview Subjects

Position	Race/Ethnicity
New Orleans Charter Advocate	White
New Orleans Charter Board Member	White
New Orleans Charter Board Member	White
New Orleans Charter Board Member	Black
New Orleans CMO Leader	White
New Orleans Community Advocate	Black
New Orleans School Leader	White
New Orleans School Leader	White
New Orleans School Leader	White
OPSB Board Member	Black
OPSB Leader	Black
State Advocate	White
State Charter Advocate	White
State Leader	Asian
State Leader	White
State Leader	White
Reformer	White
Reformer	White

Appendix B: Event Study Estimates

VARIABLES	(1) % Mastery 3rd Grade ELA	(2) % Mastery 8th Grade ELA	(3) % Mastery 3rd Grade Math	(4) % Mastery 8th Grade Math	(5) Graduation Rate	(6) College Enrollment
NOLA * Lead -4	0.785	-1.784	2.607*	-3.296*	2.139**	-1.958
(2013-2014)	(0.817)	(1.035)	(1.187)	(1.651)	(0.704)	(1.123)
NOLA * Lead -3	1.463*	-0.594	4.578***	-2.938	1.071**	2.590***
(2014-2015)	(0.666)	(0.867)	(0.758)	(1.474)	(0.394)	(0.714)
NOLA * Baseline (2015-2016)						
NOLA * Lead -1	-3.689***	2.861**	0.315	0.383	0.440	1.510**
(2016-2017)	(0.834)	(1.041)	(0.816)	(1.067)	(0.701)	(0.528)
NOLA * Event 0	-2.076**	-2.114*	0.275	-1.523	1.201	0.682
(2017-2018)	(0.613)	(1.060)	(0.745)	(1.186)	(0.804)	(0.702)
NOLA * Lag +1	-5.194***	-2.127*	1.879*	-3.205**	-0.462	4.896***
(2018-2019)	(0.686)	(0.991)	(0.763)	(1.186)	(0.766)	(0.713)
NOLA * Lag + 2					-0.145	4.102***
(2019-2020)					(0.701)	(0.932)
NOLA * Lag +3	-4.838***	-6.275***	-3.932***	-8.381***	-3.042***	3.324***
(2020-2021)	(1.021)	(0.910)	(1.133)	(1.133)	(0.738)	(0.778)

Observations	483	483	482	482	552	552
R-squared	0.914	0.892	0.904	0.824	0.848	0.744

Notes: We do not have test score information for 2019-2020. All models control for the average percent of white students, percent of black students, percent of Hispanic students, percent of disadvantaged students and percent of students with limited English proficiency within the district. Results are weighted by the total number of students in the district. District averages are weighted by the number of students in the grades eligible for the outcome (i.e. 3rd grade test scores are weighted by the number of 3rd grade students in each school, high school outcomes are weighted by the number of 9th-12th grade students in each school).