

Technical Report

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

From State Takeover to the Nation's First All-Charter, District-Govered System in New Orleans

**EDUCATION
RESEARCH ALLIANCE**
.....
FOR NEW ORLEANS

Joshua Childs, University of Texas at Austin,

Jamie M. Carroll, Tulane University,

Douglas Harris, Tulane University,

Hanora Tracy, Tulane University,

Molly Shields, Tulane University

Huriya Jabbar, University of Texas at Austin,

Julie Marsh, University of Southern California,

Kait Ogden, University of Texas at Austin

Posted July 25 2023

Education Research Alliance [NOLA.org](https://www.ERA-nola.org)

Back to the Future? From State Takeover to the Nation's First All-Charter, District-Governed School System in New Orleans

Joshua Childs, Jamie M. Carroll, Douglas Harris, Hanora Tracy,
Molly Shields, Huriya Jabbar, Julie Marsh, Kait Ogden

July 25, 2023

Abstract: We study the return of local control in New Orleans after a state takeover that turned all of the schools into charter schools. Analysis of media reports, school board meetings, school performance and enrollment data, and interviews with influential stakeholders revealed, how key roles and responsibilities changed during reunification, how political pressures and strategies shaped the reunification process, and overall impact on district operations and student outcomes. We find that state legislation precluded the local district from carrying out the roles that typify the district model, limiting district power to governing or authorizing charter schools and carrying out some system coordination. A group of influential reformers in New Orleans orchestrated the return to local control, ensuring that policies and practices put in place during the state takeover remained in the district. After reunification, school leaders felt there is less of a collaborative relationship and more of a punitive relationship with the district and tensions remain about the role of the local district in an all-charter system. We find few immediate changes in student outcomes but declines in student test scores associated with COVID-19.

Acknowledgements: This study was conducted at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University. The authors wish to thank the organization's funders: the John and Laura Arnold Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, the Spencer Foundation; and, at Tulane, the Department of Economics, Murphy Institute, and School of Liberal Arts. We thank participants at the annual meeting of the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

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 almost exclusively by locally elected school boards, have seen their authority shift through standards and accountability policies imposed by state and federal governments. 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 intervention, including turnaround and takeover (Childs & Russell, 2017; Harris & Martinez Pabon, 2022). These interventions have the effect of shifting key governing powers—setting goals and ensuring their attainment—from local school boards to higher levels of government where accountability rules are set.

The sharpest reduction in local control arises when states take over, not individual schools, but entire school districts. In nearly eliminating local governance (Welsh, 2019), the intent of state takeover is to motivate education officials to improve academic performance and, should this fail, take direct state action to shape improvement goals and outcomes. The effects of state takeovers of districts 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 & Dixon, 2016; Welsh & Williams, 2018; Welsh, 2019; Morel 2018).

Increases in state takeover of school districts has coincided with another change in education governance: the growth of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded,

privately run schools that operate under a charter or contract through a government agency.

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, 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 within education (Dallavis & Berends, 2023; Lake, 2008; Preston et al., 2012). Currently, charter schools comprise 7 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, then 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.

While typically seen as quite different types of school reform, state takeovers and PMM have an overlapping rationale: that local democratic accountability, coupled with active teacher unions, can produce unwieldy bureaucracy that undermines quality education and provides too few educational options. Therefore, these reforms can improve efficiency and overall education

outcomes by shifting power away from local district officials. In the case of district takeovers, this occurs by shifting power directly to state officials while charter schools involve shifting power to charter authorizers, charter leaders, and parents who can “vote with their feet” and transfer schools (or systems) if they are not satisfied. In either case, school districts end up with less 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. As we’ll show, while New Orleans is an extreme case, there are many examples across the country of these reforms occurring in tandem. As much as been written about the takeover itself (Harris, 2020), this paper focuses on the transition between state control under the RSD, and the eventual return of locally controlled schools to the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS)¹ 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 districts either transition back

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 discussing the superintendent and centralized office that had governance over the same schools as the OPSB before and during 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. We refer to NOLA-PS when discussing the local district post-reunification.

to local school board control (i.e. St. Louis) or come under state control (i.e. Houston), more research is necessary for understanding how these education governance models influence educational systems and opportunities for students.

Prior research on state takeovers has focused on state takeover itself (Mason & Reckow, 2017; Morel, 2018; Schuler & Goodman, 2017), but limited research has examined how takeovers, which are supposed to be temporary, end in a return to local control (Morel, 2018). This includes the politics involved in establishing local control, and the role of actors within an urban regime shape what happens within schools. There are in fact very few examples of state takeovers ending and even less research on the political processes leading up to an end in state takeover. In addition, while research has noted an increase in PMM during state takeovers, these reforms have not been fully investigated in tandem. To address the gaps in our understanding of these education reforms, our case study of New Orleans education uses Urban Regime Theory to investigate three research questions: 1) How did reunification change the key roles and responsibilities in New Orleans? 2) What were the political pressures and strategies that shaped the return to local control in New Orleans? and 3) How did the transition (to local control) impact district operations and student outcomes? We find that while reunification was viewed by many as a simple “return to local control,” it actually entailed creating an entirely new type of school district that gave OPSB less power in some ways and more power in others, especially in school governance. New Orleans is now the rare example of a locally elected school board acting as a portfolio manager over an all-charter school system. 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. This form of reunification or ending of the state takeover was exactly what the supporters of the state takeover were hoping to achieve. The question is, how did they manage to put in place a system over local objections, then cement that same system in place even after local officials were back in power? First, the state takeover gave reformers considerable leverage over the school district. Once the state had control over most schools, as well as the buildings, it controlled the terms of the debate. With that power and knowing the schools would eventually return to local control, the reformers shaped the composition of the school board and district staff. They also developed an agreement between the RSD and OPSB to help coordinate the system (e.g., a unified funding and discipline policies), which created a new set of rules, norms, and expectations. By the time the return to local control went into effect, the easiest path for the district was to operate just as the RSD had done during the state takeover period.

Post-reunification, Charter Management Organization (CMO) and school leaders feel that there is less collaboration between themselves and the district than before reunification while the new, locally-controlled district is trying to determine their roles as both centralized support and accountability officers. Tensions persist in the community as well, while some community activists hoped the return to local control would bring back more traditional, community-based schools.

Prior research suggests that this state takeover, unlike most others (Schueler & Goodman, 2017), was quite effective in improving student outcomes (Harris & Larsen, Forthcoming). Did those gains continue? Across all outcomes, it appears that New Orleans hit a plateau around 2013, roughly eight years after the state takeover and five years before the return to local control.

Since the improvement stopped well before the return to local control, it could not have been caused by it. However, in the one post-return year (2019) that we can study, there is evidence of some backsliding on test scores but the local district continued to operate in a very similar fashion after the return to local control, so there is no obvious governance- or management-related explanation for the slight fall-off in outcomes.

These findings have implications for the future of schooling in New Orleans and other places 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 reunification efforts in the years to come.

Literature Review

An important facet within the politics of education is school (or district) governance, or establishing goals, choosing leaders, and making other decisions to guide school principals, other educators, and staff the system toward these goals. In the U.S., this governance function is typically left to locally elected school boards. Accountability is an important component within school governance as it serves as a mechanism for ensuring schools meet benchmarks for student outcomes (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002). In many instances, accountability ensures that there is an appropriate stewardship of resources and the maintaining of legal and ethical standards. State mandates around accountability have impacted teaching & learning, and how educators approach their work has shifted to improvement in test scores to adhere to state policies (Lugg, Bulkley, Firestone, & Garner, 2002). While accountability standards are defined mostly at the state level,

local school governance structures determine the policies and practices that support reaching these standards and how to maintain sustainability of the system.

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. But the results have been, at best, mixed. While 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), the federal law did not apparently improve student achievement (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Moreover, 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.

While accountability systems have helped numerous school districts by supporting student learning, it has also created a perpetual state of education reform agendas and initiatives that have consumed politics and education in urban areas (Dixson & Henry, 2013; Henry & Dixson, 2016). Accountability measures can fail, and school districts may look to other governance structure models to help them meet state and national educational standards. These failures can be the result of mismanagement of resources and personnel and lack of transparency. However, accountability systems often do not consider the roles of discrimination, external situations that require additional support, and inequalities in support in school districts struggling to meet benchmarks. The ways in which states respond to school districts not meeting accountability standards can include numerous education reform initiatives. In this article, we discuss two such reforms that limit the power of local district governance: state takeover and charter schools.

State Takeover

State intervention in school districts has been a policy approach for over thirty years (Steiner, 2005). While 34 states have mechanisms by which to takeover a school district, only about 20 states have actually taken over school districts (Mason & Reckhow, 2017; Schueler & Bleiger, 2022). Financial mismanagement and illegal activity were seen as the reasons why a state would takeover a district initially (Cibulka & Derlin, 1998). During the school accountability era beginning in the 1990s and increasing with the passage of NCLB, we have seen that state takeover policies are often triggered when districts are not meeting academic accountability measures. Through the process of state takeover, state-level government entities assume all responsibilities around the decision-making of what happens within a school district. Local school boards are either disbanded altogether or have their powers substantially reduced, and a new 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 dedicated resources and support that will lead to improvement in teaching and learning opportunities. However, there are questions about the way in which state takeover policies infringe on educators' and administrators' autonomy and reduce local democratic accountability by the community, who can have their voices represented in their leaders and in school actions. 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 the failure of students to have educational authority. There can be considerable 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.

From an equity perspective, the school districts exposed to state takeover often have large populations of minoritized students, have a significant number of students who come from low-income communities, and have been impacted by a variety of societal ills that have complicated educational processes. District takeovers in general occur in Democratically-led urban areas that educate more Black and Hispanic students in states with white state-level leadership and Republican governors, creating tension between the local community and state leaders (Morel, 2019). The logic of reform—in that the district leaders are not capable of improving their schools—often disproportionately labels Black and Hispanic/Latinx leaders as being “corrupt” and “disorganized” (Osworth, 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 communities of color (Morel, 2018; Cahen, 2023). State takeovers in effect remove local democratic accountability from schooling, as locally-elected school boards are ripped of their powers and the community can no longer use their votes to control who leads the district. In addition, education reformers who are proponents of market-based educational strategies can have significant influence when state takeover occurs (Jabbar, 2015). Research has highlighted that nonprofit and philanthropic organizations' involvement in the state takeover process are created so that these organizations can influence academic policies and practices. Thus, state

takeovers can be politically contentious and disrupt the locally controlled school district tradition (Scheuler, 2019).

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). Analyses of the state takeover in New Orleans revealed positive effects on student test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment (Harris and Larsen, Forthcoming), though this is an unusual case in both the process and charter-orientation of the takeover effort. Other research also suggests that the New Orleans reforms led to a de-emphasis on the arts—in a city where these are a core part of the culture (Woodward, 2018). 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; Welst et al., 2018).

State takeover is designed to be temporary, and most state laws require for 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. State takeovers can result in entire school districts being closed or combined with neighboring districts, which occurs more often in majority-black school districts (Morel, 2018). However, there are very few examples of school districts returning 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 ended in 2017, but these new systems remained. The longest-running state takeover appears to have occurred in Jersey City, NJ in 1990 and didn't 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% of city schools in 2019, are not authorized by the local school district and remain under control of county or state authorizers. The state takeover of schools in Oakland, CA, which occurred mainly for financial reasons, ended with a larger budget deficit than before takeover and an increase in state-authorized charter schools. 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

Trends in state takeovers are intertwined with the growth of charter schools and the closely related idea of PMM governance of schools. The recent increase in state takeovers coincided with an increase in charter school enrollment nationally, from less than 1% in 1990 to around 7% 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). In a systematic review of state takeovers, Osworth similarly noted "charter schools have become nearly ubiquitous with takeover policies" (pg. 9). District takeovers in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan,

Massachusetts, 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 is tied to state takeover as well.

The functioning of PMM models depends in part on two dimensions of legal status: which organization(s) function as the authorizers and 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, or some other entity. However, with charter schools generally, there are multiple authorizers operating within each jurisdiction.² Whether or not these authorizers see themselves as competitors, the existence of multiple authorizers affects the degrees to which they can coordinate activities in ways that serve all children in each jurisdiction.

The second important legal categorization is the LEA, which determines how federal, state, and local funding will be distributed among the district schools and is responsible for designing systems for special education students, discipline, and other district-level services. At

² The “managed market” language is a bit broader and encompasses cases with multiple authorizers in each jurisdiction.

the extreme, every school can be its own LEA, which assigns more power to the schools themselves. In general, CMOs, which manage multiple charter schools, are the LEAs for all the schools within their purview. In PMM districts, assigning LEA status is an important issue. Whether schools are a part of CMOs is also important beyond the LEA status. Charter research suggests that these distinctions can become important when district governance changes, given that schools and CMOs assigned to their own LEA have more power in determining how their funding is allocated. CMOs can also have increasing power within geographic districts as their share of schools increases; they may be able to participate in higher-level decision-making to ensure the district policies align with their wants and needs.

Each of these dimensions of legal status—LEA and authorizer—has significant implications over the power structure of schools in each locality. When charter schools are their own LEAs, they have more power 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 similar to those over traditional public schools.³

While New Orleans is unique in how the state takeover occurred (in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina), in its adoption of an all-charter PMM, and in the mostly positive effects on student outcomes⁴, there may be similarities between New Orleans and other school districts that underwent state takeover and eventually returned to local control. Most of the research in this area focuses on the process of state takeover and the outcomes associated with it, but we know

³ In traditional school districts, the district is the LEA.

⁴ Denver’s adoption of the PMM method also resulted in improved test scores and graduation rates compared with other districts in the state (Baxter et al. 2022)

very little about the political pressures, processes, and effects involved in the return to local control. In this paper, we provide one of, if not the first, examinations of a return to local control after state takeover and the creation of the first all-charter, single authorizer PMM run by a local school board.

Urban Regime Theory

Urban Regime Theory (URT) 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 argues that cities are governed by a complex web of actors and institutions, rather than a single, centralized authority (Whelan et al., 1994). These actors are often referred to as "regime members," (Mitra & Frick, 2011). 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, 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. At the same time, URT can help explain the role of community organizations and grassroots movements in shaping education policy. These groups often have different priorities than business leaders and may advocate for policies, such as increased funding for public schools, smaller class sizes, or more diverse curricula (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2020). By building coalitions with other interest groups, these organizations can exert pressure on the urban regime and push for policies that align with their goals. In recent years, urban education governance has shifted both towards centralization through mayoral control and state takeovers, and school-based autonomy through charter schools and voucher programs (Lay & Bauman, 2019). Amos (2010) references education governance as a set of measures and structures that support quality education in schools. The pre-Katrina urban regime was like many other urban districts that have experienced state takeover and charter schools. However, Hurricane Katrina dramatically changed both the power of various potential actors, and their perceived interests in a way that made the reforms that led to local control again in New Orleans possible.

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). 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). 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 lasting 45-90 minutes with state leaders, community stakeholders, district personnel, and school leaders. Table 1 provides demographic information of each interviewee. All names are deidentified and interviewees are indicated based on position during the reunification period.

Table 1: Information about Interview Subjects

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

Publicly available data (e.g., board meeting materials and videos) were used to develop interview questions, triangulate interview data, and provide contextual information on reunification. Specifically, the research team collected and organized OPSB action items from board meetings between 2015 and 2020 to find items related to reunification. Then, researchers watched board meeting video recordings to analyze comment cards, 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 urban regime theory 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. Throughout the study, the team debriefed potential findings at multiple stages of

the data analysis process. We also debriefed findings with other researchers with expertise in New Orleans, state takeover (and transition), and the sociocultural contexts of education policy and reform and gave a public presentation to the community with some preliminary results.

Quantitative Data and Methods

To understand how reunification was associated with student outcomes in New Orleans, we examine 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 exclude any special districts or smaller districts outside of New Orleans that only include single schools. The student outcomes we examine are the % of students receiving mastery or above in 3rd and 8th grade English and Math on the LEAP standardized test, the graduation rate, and the percent of students enrolling in college the first year after high school graduation.

We start by comparing overall trends in student outcomes in New Orleans to districts across the state from the 2013-2014 school year to the 2020-2021 school year, weighted by the number of students in the district. Then, we use an event study approach to estimate the effects of the return to local control on student outcomes. Specifically, we examine differences in student outcomes in New Orleans compared with other districts in Louisiana from 2013-2014 to 2020-2021. We estimate the following equation:

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

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 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 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.

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). Despite schools with strong cultural ties to the community and, by some accounts, schools that made students feel connected and respected (Harris, 2020), student achievement, high school graduation, and

college-going ranked at the bottom of the state, which itself was second worst in the country. These outcomes were often attributed to a history of financial mismanagement, corruption, and instability (Harris, 2020). 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. The Louisiana state legislature passed a law before the storm, in 2004, to create the state RSD, which allowed 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 participated in these prior actions by the Louisiana Legislature and became key actors in the design and implementation of the state takeover. 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, 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 efforts. Building on the legal framework from before the storm, this group of 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, union contracts had to be renegotiated, 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).

One critical resource—school facilities—also became under the management of the state through Act 35. The RSD, using federal FEMA funds, had to rebuild facilities that had been damaged by the storm and ensure current and returning students had a place to attend school in their neighborhood. This means that 107 school facilities within the city of New Orleans were taken away from the local district and put under the discretion of RSD in late 2005. The RSD was criticized for a lack of transparency in facility decisions, but the result was a vast improvement in the majority of buildings across the city.

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. Working with the community, school leaders, and school parent and alumni organizations, the local district converted three-quarters of the schools under their control to charter schools by 2015. Overall, the number of direct-run schools in New Orleans decreased over the years as more schools were taken over by charters. By the 2014-2015 school year, all of the RSD schools had been converted to charters. In addition, the charter schools in New Orleans in the years leading up to reunification became increasingly under the purview of local CMOs,

including Collegiate Academies and InspireNOLA, and one national CMO, KIPP. The number of single-site charter schools declined gradually over time as the RSD allowed more measurably successful CMOs to expand. The power of teachers' unions remained minimal, as collective bargaining had to occur on a school-by-school basis in the all-charter system. This history of the state takeover, the influence of the reformers, 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 after 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 on influencing the return of local control, and the role politics played in reunification. Finally, 3) How did the transition to local control impact district operations and student outcomes? 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. We also 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?

In May of 2016, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 91, which 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. 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 Act 91 precluded the district from carrying out its typical functions:

In order to ensure the appropriate level of autonomy to enable educators to successfully prepare students for success in college and career:

(1) 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—but the charter autonomy present during the state takeover was upheld.

With these duties under the power of charter school operators, what remains for the district? There are three 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 manages school buildings across the district to ensure students attend school in safe buildings with sufficient resources. Finally, the district gained control over charter authorization and determining what schools would remain open or be closed. The return to local control in New Orleans, through Act 91, therefore defined—and redefined—authority along many dimensions, as summarized in Table 2. While NOLA-PS did not regain its power over schools’ curriculum, instruction, and school staffing, it did regain power over enrollment, charter authorization, and facilities.

Table 2: 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.
<i>Governance</i>	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.
<i>Governance</i>	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.
<i>Governance</i>	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.
<i>Governance</i>	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 of facilities, except for those being renovated with FEMA funds.
<i>Governance</i>	Local	State	Local

It is not just that prior responsibilities shifted across actors but that the PMM system redefined the nature of those responsibilities. It has been common for school districts to decide when and where to open additional traditional public schools, but, under the PMM system, they were 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.”⁵ The district’s responsibilities did not so much grow or shrink as they did shift and adapt. Despite the limited power of the local district as outlined by Act 91, NOLA-PS did gain back its pre-Katrina authority around enrollment and facilities management. Along with charter authorizing, decisions about where charter schools would be located, especially within the merging of schools, closure of schools, and opening of schools, is a huge source of power for the local district.

Enrollment is another area that is centralized in the district. 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 some charter schools have high student achievement because they only select students who are already highly motivated to succeed and not because they are providing a better education to those students than traditional public schools. Known as “cream skimming” there is some evidence in the early years of the RSD that this was happening. In 2011, the RSD began requiring all of their schools to participate in a common application process to provide more transparency, fairness, and efficiency in the process of school

⁵ 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.

assignment. However, local district schools did not originally participate. Getting into the academically selective local district schools was not only challenging academically, but also logistically, with parents having to attend multiple events, fill out forms, and jump through many hoops to get their children considered for enrollment—for the most part seats were then determined by a lottery. Thus, parents had to navigate a complicated system that was bifurcated by school governance and selectivity to find a school for their children. 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 provided schools with more resources to support these students. 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 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 more, 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.

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.

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. The local school district did take control of the centralized enrollment system, facilities, and charter authorization, which was previously under the control of the state. The state law that reformers wrote shifted 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. Moving forward, 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.⁷ 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. 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. 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?

The reunification of New Orleans Public Schools represents another shift in New Orleans educational history. Reunification represented a concerted effort to bring under local control the city's fragmented, two-district education system, and aimed to restore 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

⁷ The state overturned the supermajority requirement in 2021, but the school board voted to keep it in place as of the writing of this paper.

landscape created an opportunity for powerful actors, 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 provides context for understanding how the education reformers leveraged their political power and influence during the reunification process. This context is critical for understanding the motivations, tensions, and complexities that shaped the educational landscape in New Orleans before, during, and after reunification.

Education reformers, recognizing that RSD control of New Orleans schools had run its course, 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 knew that they could influence the outcome of the legislation and they knew how they wanted the new district to look. State law required that the RSD return control of the schools to the school district, but it was vague about the process and details. 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. As one state leader explained, "...I knew deep in my heart that the schools did not belong with the state because the state is not equipped to be a local school district."

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 the plan that would allow schools to return to local control if they are 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... That there wasn't a lot—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.

One critical concern for charter school leaders was whether charter schools and CMOs could maintain their LEA status when returning to local control. Remaining an LEA gave them the power to receive and distribute local, state, and federal funds.⁸ A few schools that were eligible to return to local control cited this as a reason why they remained under the RSD; school leaders did not trust the local district to handle the disbursement of funds (Dreilinger, 2012). However, even after the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 330 in 2013, which also allowed for schools to maintain their LEA status when returning to local control, no schools opted to transition to local governance until 2015, when only one, Martin Luther King Jr. Charter, changed their governance to the OPSB. 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

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

⁸ Remaining as the LEA also gave charters and CMOs the responsibility to comply with federal special education and other state regulations.

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. 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, which in turn would influence future education priorities. The election of Edwards, along with the knowledge that John White would eventually leave his role as state superintendent, 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 the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) "and the state are tired of New Orleans [reforms]. I thank myself every day that we returned these schools 'cause the moment [the state superintendent] left, he does not want to be bothered with New Orleans charter schools, and that's not an unreasonable position."

The return to local control was politically and strategically timed for when state leaders believed OPSB would have the capacity and support to operate all New Orleans schools. 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." The timing was important partly because it was well known that BESE had no intention to remain the long-term operators of New Orleans schools. The reformers also sought to instill their rules and norms into OPSB before reunification occurred and that took time, as we explain in the next section.

Transforming the Local District—Before Reunification

One aspect of this timing was ensuring that the local district and RSD were ready to be brought into alignment 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 similar ways as the RSD, especially in sustaining the PMM model with all charter schools.

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, started the process of differentiated funding for at-risk students, and stipulated that the RSD and local district should share data and work together to determine the district’s demographic needs moving forward. Many of the policies put in place by this CEA were codified in Act 91.

In addition, the reformers wanted to ensure the OPSB school board had the right composition of pro-charter members who would 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. As one district leader conveyed, “there were a lot of key actors, and [reforms] couldn’t have been done without a collaborative effort...a herculean effort to get where we’re at.” 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.

Although the board remained somewhat divided on their views of the next steps for New Orleans education after this 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 picked Dr. Henderson Lewis, a charter friendly superintendent with prior experience working in New Orleans charter schools and who sought to unify all charters within NOLA-PS (Hasselle, 2018). With school board members and a superintendent that would uphold the reforms put in place since Katrina and agreements between RSD and OPSB to begin centralizing operations and unifying policies, the reformers were ready to begin the reunification process.

Instilling the Reforms in Statute

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. But 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. RSD and OPSB school leaders alike were concerned that reunification would force them to change their school operations to align to new centralized policies or adjust to new accountability standards. The language in Act 91 described in the prior section was taken directly from the OPSB charter school contracts from before reunification. RSD had a similar relationship with their charter schools, as well as similar language in their charter contracts: “The Charter Operator shall be the final authority in matters affecting the Charter School, including but not limited to, staffing, financial accountability, and curriculum.” According to one account, it was the OPSB leaders that pushed for the bill to include language about their autonomy to ensure the new district leaders would not disrupt their operations. RSD leaders agreed, given that this language aligned with policy and practice already established in the RSD.

The reformers, led by Leslie Jacobs, crafted their own 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.

This work by the reformers 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. This bill was a stark departure from previous bill versions about New Orleans schools and local control. In addition to forcing the district to leave management autonomy with the schools (see above), it gave the New Orleans superintendent the power to make recommendations for charter school authorization, required all schools to participate in a centralized enrollment system, and mandated that school funding be weighted based on student

characteristics. The bill also granted NOLA-PS authority over enrollment and discipline decisions, an important distinction when it came to making policy decisions. Eventually, SB 432 would pass both chambers of the Louisiana legislature during the summer of 2016 and become known as Act 91. With its passage, the reunification was official.

Diving into One Critical Battle: Facilities

School buildings are a critical component of any type of school system and became an important bargaining tool during the process of reunification. The initial state takeover had shifted control of all the buildings housing schools under the RSD to the state. Act 91, too, had several important stipulations around facility management. While it gave most of the control over facilities back to the local district, RSD would still maintain authority over some buildings that were, or soon to be, under construction with federal relief funds.

For the remaining buildings that would be under NOLA-PS authority, the bill outlined that the district would not need to reimburse the RSD for improvements made to buildings, nor would the district be held liable for any outstanding loans or lawsuits that occurred while a building was under RSD control. These provisions had two benefits for NOLA-PS: it gave the local district most of its old facility powers back while also protecting it financially and keeping some potential costs off their budget. Act 91 allowed the state to transfer its authority over facilities to the local district without disrupting the autonomy of charter schools and their building assets. According to one state leader:

You're seeing the last checks of the post Katrina FEMA settlement get cut around priorities that the state and the district hammered out as the final tranche of funding that was negotiated during that period. For example, the rebuild at Mcdonogh 35 and on Kerlerec Street in Treme. The rebuilding of a couple of school buildings on the West Bank, Martin Behrman, for example, that were kind of long in the makings and needed to be negotiated. So I guess I, and then I think post 2018 the state's been pretty hands-off.

Where the Power Resides

Beyond just returning state-seized schools under the Recovery School District (RSD) back to OPSB control, Act 91 also gave power to the district to operate beyond just an authorizer of charter schools. As an RSD leader recognized, “[Act 91] gives them [OPSB] a ton more power, power over enrollment, power to set attendance zones, power to do a differentiated funding formula, power to do expulsion...all these powers.” Under reunification, OPSB gained significant power in several key areas. First, OPSB had the authority to determine which students were admitted to schools under its jurisdiction and could shape the distribution of students across the district and influence factors such as diversity, neighborhood representation, and access to educational resources that may be directly tied to specific schools. With the additional authority to make decisions regarding student disciplinary actions, OPSB under reunification had the ability to establish and enforce policies related to student expulsion that had previously been handled by RSD. As one state leader described, “If you just returned schools [to local control] without Act 91, the only power OPSB has is that of a charter school authorizer. This [Act 91] gives them a ton more power...” Act 91 was an important component for equipping district stakeholders and leaders with the necessary power to oversee (and support) reunification. Although the local school district had less control than it had before the state takeover, Act 91 solidified which powers would be centralized in the district—namely enrollment systems and facilities management.

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, community members

were vocal on 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.-In a 2013 Times-Picayune article, it 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." Two years later, in 2015, a few months after Henderson Lewis was hired to lead OPSB, and a few months before Act 91 would be signed into law, the Times-Picayune noted, "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." 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, thus, leading the district to losing "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 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. As one advocate described the governmental dichotomy 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 schoolboard, no matter 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 fact that the school board, as one CMO leader relayed, as being "dysfunctional", there was a need to reevaluate the political dynamics and the expected role of OPSB. Reunification put under the microscope the role, responsibilities, and power within the OPSB, and how that would manifest within the various levels of the public school system. 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 schools in New Orleans transitioned from traditional public schools to charter. However, once reunification became reality, aligning the politics surrounding the reunification process and determining the role of the OPSB were connected. Clarity was necessary to consider the OPSB's functions and duties when it came to managing a district composed entirely of charter schools.

Reunification also changed the power structure in a different way. During the 2005-2015 period, the RSD had worked in close coordination with the non-profit, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). The organization helped recruit teachers and incubate new charter school operators. Once this 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.

Since reunification, there has been consistent turnover in district staff. New state legislators have been elected, and a new superintendent replaced Henderson Lewis. 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. As one CMO leader described it as:

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 experience 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 teaching and learning endeavors, leadership pipelines, and improvements in curriculum.

How did the transition impact district operations and student outcomes?

Relationships between School Leaders and the District

As mentioned earlier, from the beginning there was concern about how NOLA-PS would manage all the schools that would be under their control because of reunification. Furthermore, questions emerged around how the reunification process would change district operations—and thereby shape school operations. Reunification created concerns within New Orleans that there were not many people who had experience running a large school system that had just been

given back authority from the state. One CMO leader outlined the necessary increase in district capacity:

For sure since reunification, the school board has a ton more power because they have more schools. They had 5 schools, and then—I don't know, maybe 11 more schools. Then reunification happens, and now they have 70. You'll have to check those numbers for me, but they got a lot more kids... That's spending power. It's not a lot of spending power, I guess, but it's also political power.

We display these enrollment numbers in Figure 1. Indeed, 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. 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 is 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 is still trying to figure out what it means to manage a portfolio district of schools, some even citing that they wanted *more* centralized services then prescribed by Act 91. For example, one CMO leader cited a perception that the RSD provided more help in managing their budgets than NOLA-PS:

If I don't have the budget to pay my teachers, I can't run my school. In a decentralized district, if we wanna run our district this way, this is—we have to actually cooperate differently. I don't think our district, NOLA PS, understands that as well as the RSD did.

It's just a different economic game. The district doesn't get a pot of money and then distribute it among its schools. The district has to help all of us manage our portfolios.

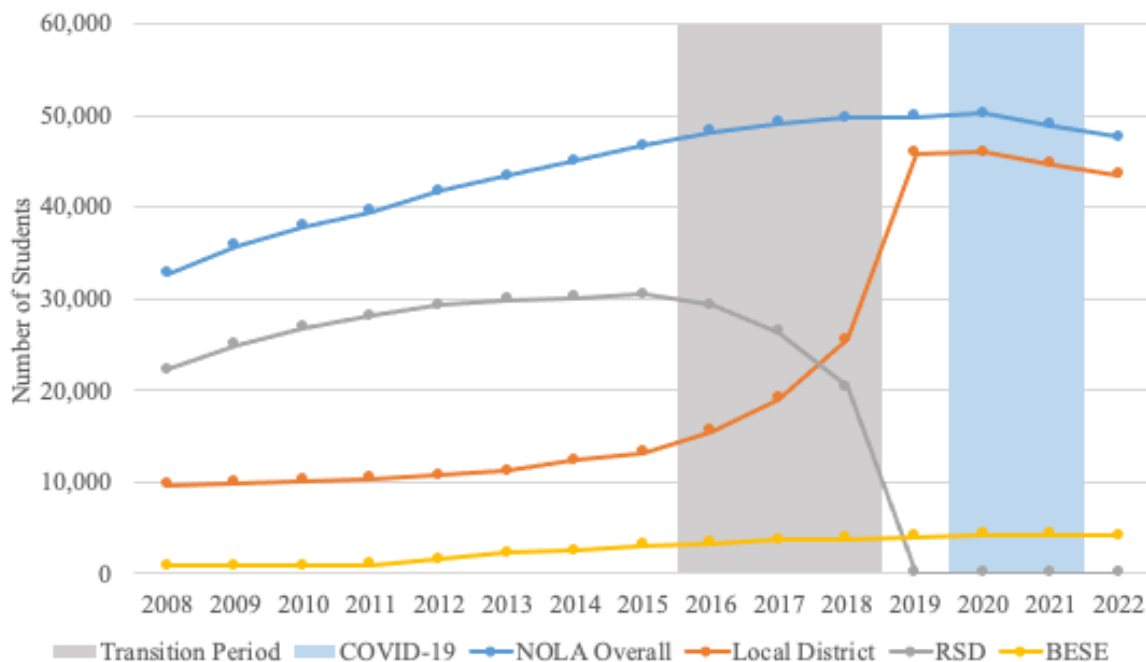
School and CMO leaders described a perception that the district wasn't "putting in full effort" and providing services that could support the operations of all schools across the district, including food services, insurance, and transportation. New Orleans schools are required to provide free transportation options for all of their students, including school buses and public transportation, and transportation costs continue to be one of the highest line items for schools. In addition, the current 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.

With a perception of a lack of collaboration and relationships between district and school leaders comes a lack of trust with district-level decisions. 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." A school leader feels "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." 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 is a perception that NOLA-PS is 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 more punitive relationship with the district than in the past could stem from changes in the needs of the district. As shown in Figure 1, student enrollment in New Orleans schools was steadily increasing from 2008 through reunification. However, as is occurring across the country since the COVID-19 pandemic began, enrollment is now in decline. 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 district now is having to “right-size” the district—trying to have enough seats for students to allow for flexibility in choice, but not having continuous under enrollment in 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 decisions the district has to make now in terms of closing or merging schools may be less obvious and more challenging than in the past.

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 is the sum 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).

As one of the few areas of control that OPSB has operative authority over, facilities management remains a controversial topic and an example of how power is manifested within OPSB. The declining enrollment may lead to financial liability associated with maintaining historic school facilities across the city. Making decisions about where schools are sited, when schools move, and which buildings are closed has become even more of an issue. According to one charter board member:

I think they [OPSB] have this massive job. I mean, they've got all these schools they oversee. Just the facilities...I think it's a lot, um, because they have to manage facilities and they need facilities and really liaisons at each school and not every school has them.

Um, so I think there's a lot there and there's never enough money to fix all that needs to be fixed or upgrade what should be upgraded. Um, so I think that's an issue because 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 feel that this process was more collaborative with the RSD, community members did not feel that the process was transparent or fair. NOLA-PS tried to change that.

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 this concern:

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 charters, 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 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.

With reunification, the district's mission has changed in a way to manage what is already there, not transform what was. This has led some operations to feel more like a traditional school district, in that politics and bureaucracy have taken on a larger role. As the local school board and district office are still figuring out their role in this unique district, school leaders do not feel there is a consistent mission or set of principles driving their decisions.

I think as a district, um, what has been lacking and what we need to do now—or what we needed to do a long time ago that we never did was be really clear about what is the role of the central district and what is the role of the charter..when do we collaborate, and when do we go off and do our own thing..that has been our biggest challenge. Um, our district has not been consistent there over the last—since we have returned, and that has been very challenging as a school leader, to work in a district that is unclear about what its vision is.

Without a clear vision of the roles of school leaders and district leaders in the PMM model in New Orleans, it leaves uncertainty within how decisions are made and why policies do and don't go into effect. The lack of trust, transparency, and collaboration can be tied to missing a shared understanding of mission, vision, and purpose.

Flexibility of Charter Contracts

Although both the RSD and OPSB had similar language around school autonomy in their charter contracts, whether and how these contracts could be amended differed pre-reunification. In the RSD, there was flexibility built into the contracts that allowed for new centralized policies to affect school operations. Specifically, the same statute that laid out charter autonomy also included language about when these policies can be changed: “except as otherwise provided in this contract and as provided by applicable law and by policies promulgated by BESE.” A prominent example of the district using this flexibility is in building the centralized enrollment system. In one school year, 2012-2013, all of the schools in the RSD had to use the centralized enrollment system, regardless of what their charter contracts said or when they were set to expire. For charter schools governed by the OPSB before reunification, their contracts were set, and no new policies could be introduced until their contracts were up for renewal. Thus, the OPSB schools did not join the centralized enrollment system until they were up for renewal. The authorizer-charter school relationship within the OPSB was more similar to how traditional school districts, including those with charter schools in other areas of Louisiana, operated.

After reunification, all of the charter contracts for RSD and OPSB schools had to be rewritten and new language was added that allowed for flexibility:

Authorizer shall notify Charter Operator and Charter School, in writing, of any proposed changes to the CSAF [Charter School Accountability Framework] or OPSB policies affecting Charter School, Charter Operator, or any obligations under this Agreement. Authorizer shall engage with Charter School on such changes, and provide Charter School an opportunity to present feedback thereto prior to presentation to OPSB for approval.

Thus, the charter agreements post-reunification aligned more with the style of those in the RSD pre-reunification, allowing for changes to policies. However, as described above, many school leaders do not feel that the collaboration and feedback from charter operators in the process of changing policies has been happening in practice.

Growing Tension Between the State and Local District

CMO leaders were critical when it came to navigating the relationships that existed between the district and state education department. Before reunification, there was a perception that the state leadership designed policies that were supportive of New Orleans 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...For me, again, if the state is RSD, and RSD is a state, it was RSD. 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 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 effected more change because there was more ownership there.

There’s additional tension between the district and the state legislature. While Act 91 was a bipartisan bill, it did not have all of the support of the New Orleans delegation in the state house. Since reunification, there have been attempts by the New Orleans delegation, led mostly by now Senator Bouie, 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.

Part of this political tension stems from differences in opinion between the community and the district in the effectiveness of charter schools and the community desire 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. 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]?

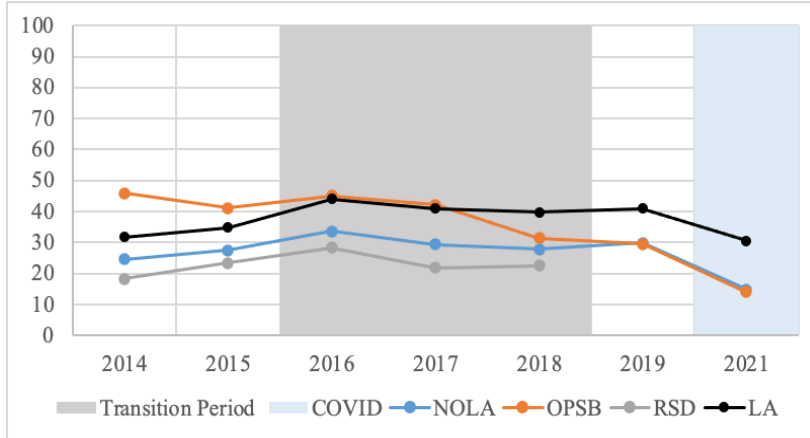
As mentioned by the state leader above, Act 91 does not disallow traditional public schools to open in the district, however the school board members supported by the education reformers and the superintendent selected by this board have not chosen to open any direct-run schools. Some community members wanted and expected more traditional public schools with the return to local control, but this return still limited the power of the local district. Some state leaders see the anti-charter school push in New Orleans as being driven by national progressive politics, which have become more critical of school choice policies and charter schools in recent years. Future changes in state and local leadership may ameliorate some of this tension.

Impact on Student Outcomes

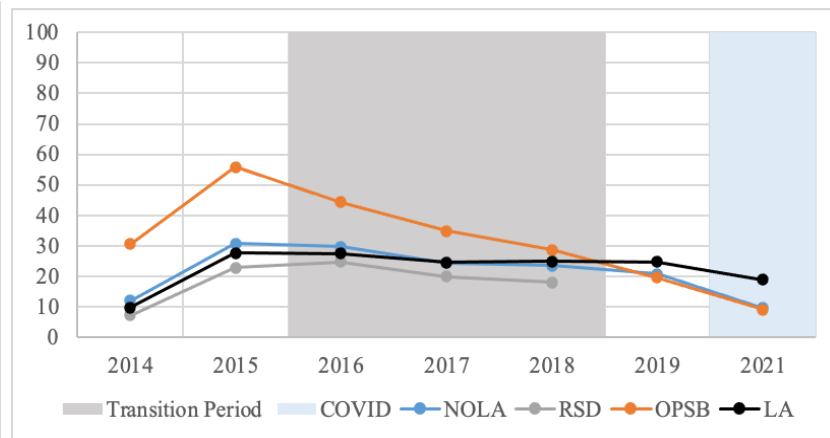
To understand how the change in governance affected student outcomes, we compare student test scores, graduation rates and college enrollment rates from before and after reunification in New Orleans to outcomes for students in schools across the state. We start by describing the trends in Louisiana overall, New Orleans overall, schools governed by the RSD, and schools governed by the local district from the 2013-2014 school year through the 2020-2021 school year. Figure 2 displays these trends for the percent of students reaching mastery or above in 3rd and 8th grade Math and English. We focus on the percent of students reaching mastery because that is the level the state deems as “passing” for accountability purposes. Overall, the schools governed by the local district, which were not taken over by the state because they were higher-achieving, had higher student achievement than the state average before and during the reunification, while RSD schools’ performance was on average lower than the state average.

Figure 2: Percent of students reaching mastery or above in math and English in Louisiana overall, in New Orleans overall, and by governance, school years 2014 through 2020-2021

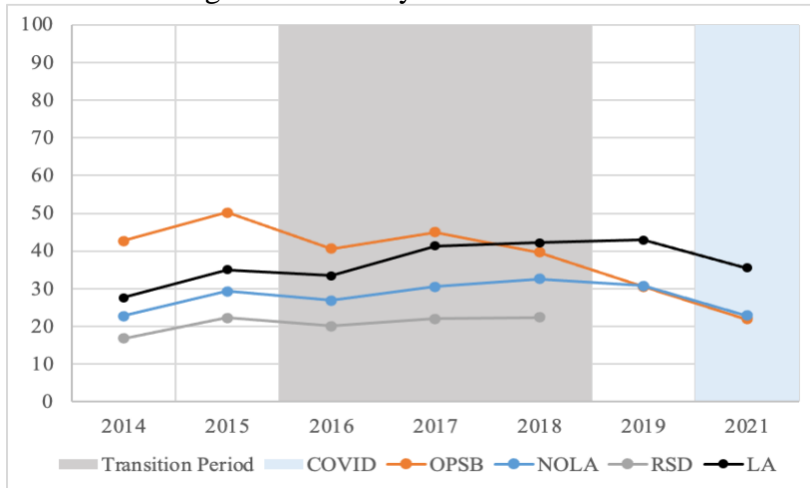
A. 3rd Grade Math % Mastery or Above



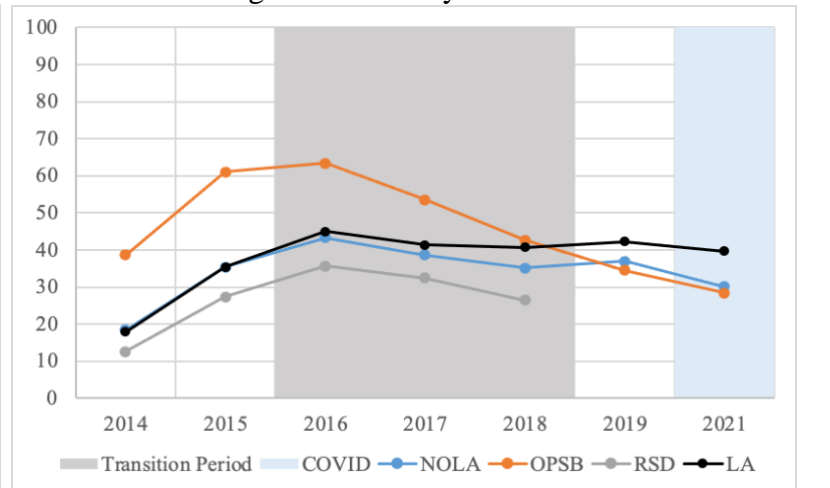
B. 8th Grade Math % Mastery or Above



C. 3rd Grade English % Mastery or Above



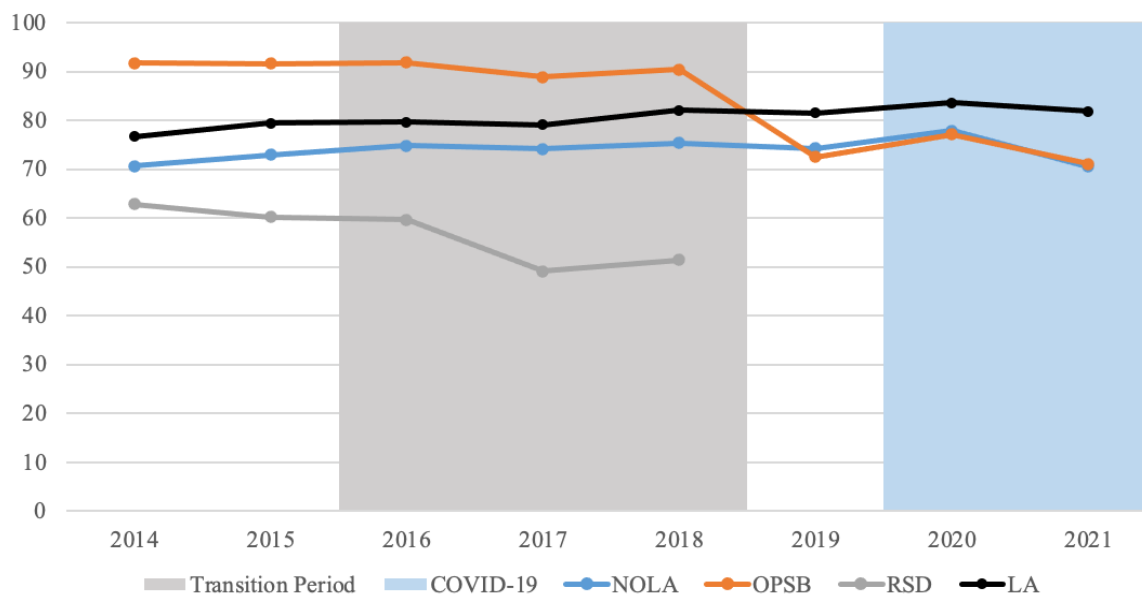
D. 8th Grade English % Mastery or Above



Note: School years listed represent the spring of the year (i.e. 2007-2008 is represented by 2008). Note that we do not have data for the 2019-2020 school year because students were not required to take standardized tests that year. RSD schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Recovery School District within the given school year. OPSB schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board or NOLA-PS in the given school year. NOLA schools include all publicly funded schools in New Orleans. LA schools include all publicly funded schools across the state of Louisiana. The transition period indicates the time period when schools were beginning to transition from RSD to OPSB (2016 through 2018). COVID indicates the school-years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

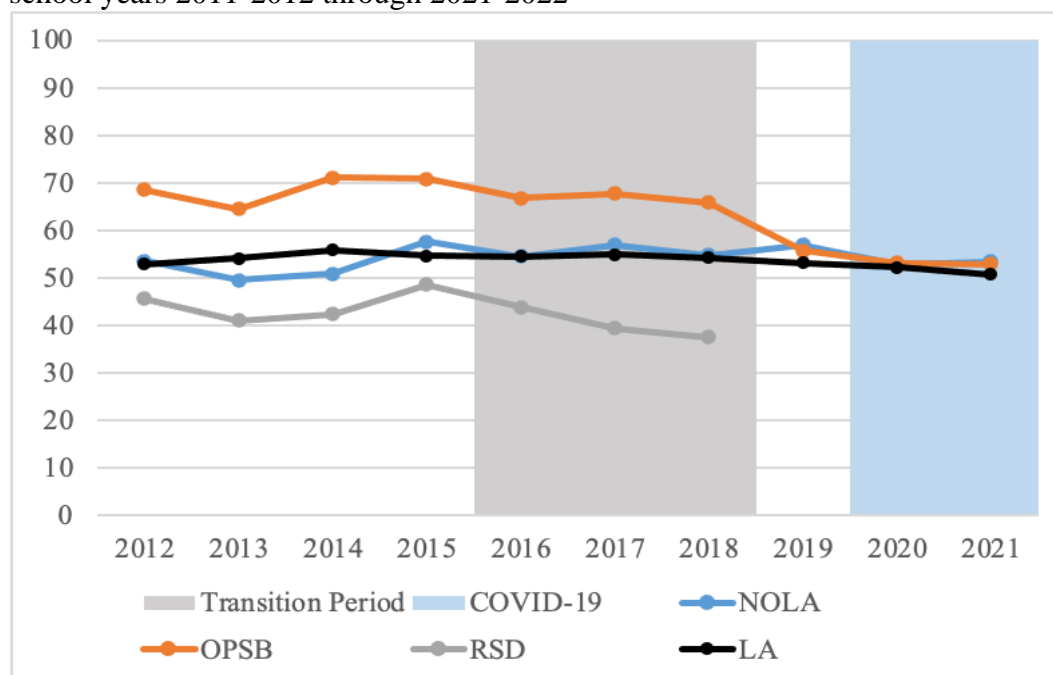
Around the 2017-2018 school year, when schools from the RSD were transitioning to governance under the local district, the average percent of students reaching mastery or above declined to below the state average, with a steeper decline occurring in the 2020-2021 school year after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Figure 3 displays a similar pattern with high school graduation. For college enrollment, shown in Figure 4, the schools governed by the OPSB had college enrollment rates that were on average higher than the state during and after reunification.

Figure 3: Cohort graduation rate in Louisiana overall and in New Orleans overall and by governance, school years 2013-2014 through 2020-2021



Note: School years listed represent the spring of the year (i.e. 2013-2014 is represented by 2014). RSD schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Recovery School District within the given school year. OPSB schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board or NOLA-PS in the given school year. NOLA schools include all publicly funded schools in New Orleans. LA schools include all publicly funded schools across the state of Louisiana. The transition period indicates the time period when schools were beginning to transition from RSD to OPSB (2016 through 2018). COVID indicates the school-years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

Figure 4: Percent of students who enrolled in any postsecondary institution in their first year after graduating high school in Louisiana overall and in New Orleans overall and by governance, school years 2011-2012 through 2021-2022



Note: School years listed represent the spring of the year (i.e. 2013-2014 is represented by 2014). RSD schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Recovery School District within the given school year. OPSB schools include publicly funded New Orleans schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board or NOLA-PS in the given school year. NOLA schools include all publicly funded schools in New Orleans. LA schools include all publicly funded schools across the state of Louisiana. The transition period indicates the time period when schools were beginning to transition from RSD to OPSB (2016 through 2018). COVID indicates the school-years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

Our event study analysis examines these patterns further by comparing the changes in student outcomes among students in New Orleans schools to those in districts across the state. We use the year prior to reunification (2015-2016) as a baseline and analyze 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 examine how these trends changed after the COVID-19 pandemic began, but we do not have test score estimates for 2019-2020. The estimates from these analyses are in Table 3. 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 and 8th grade English 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 test scores and after reunification there was an additional decline in 8th grade Math, but an increase in 8th grade English. 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

Table 3: Event Study Estimates

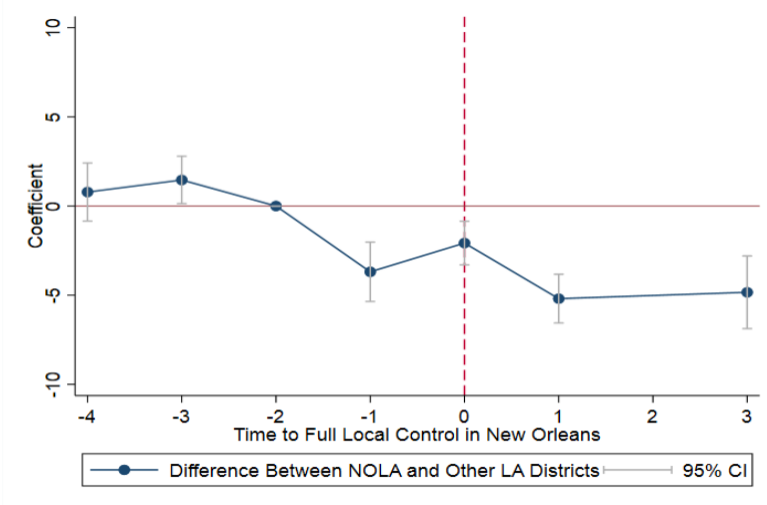
VARIABLES	(1) % Mastery 3 rd Grade ELA	(2) % Mastery 3 rd Grade Math	(3) % Mastery 8 th Grade ELA	(4) % Mastery 8 th Grade Math	(5) Graduation Rate	(6) College Enrollment
NOLA * Lead -4 (2013-2014)	0.785 (0.817)	-1.784 (1.035)	2.607* (1.187)	-3.296* (1.651)	2.139** (0.704)	-1.958 (1.123)
NOLA * Lead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

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

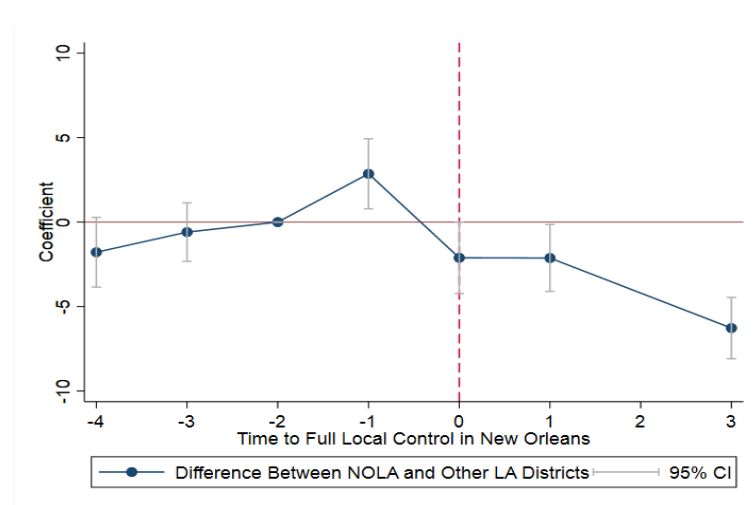
Notes: We do not have test score information for 2020. All models control for the average percent of white students, percent of black students, percent of Hispanic students, percent of disadvantaged students and percent of students with limited English proficiency within the district. Results are weighted 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).

Figure 5: 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

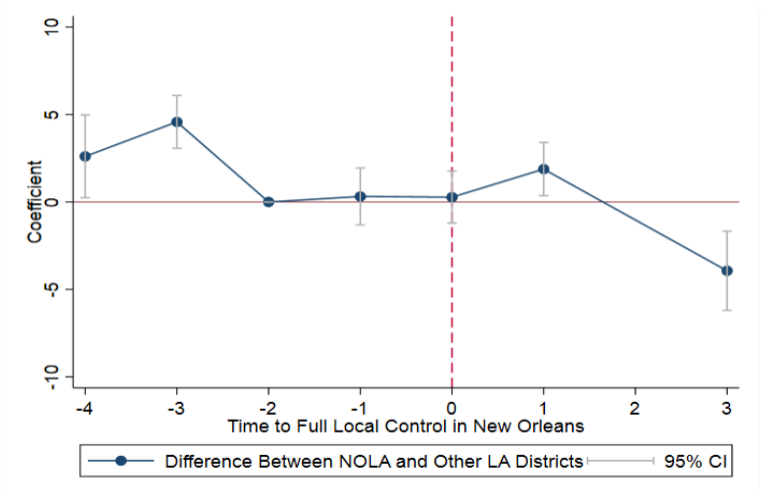
A. 3rd Grade ELA % Mastery or Above



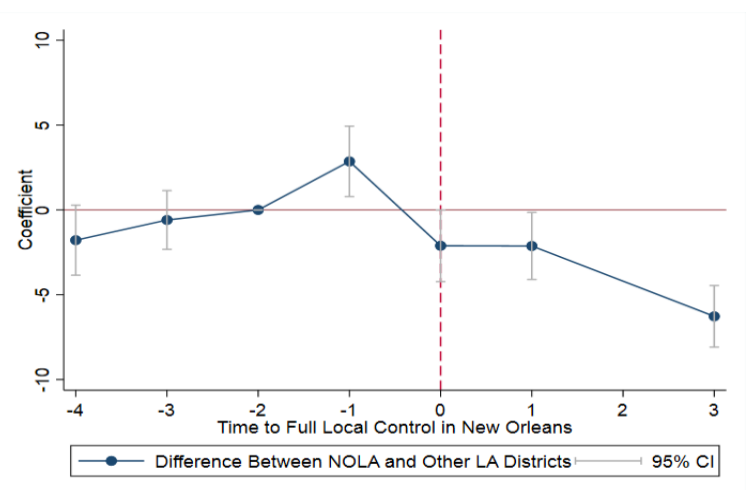
B. 8th Grade ELA % Mastery or Above



C. 3rd Grade Math % Mastery or Above



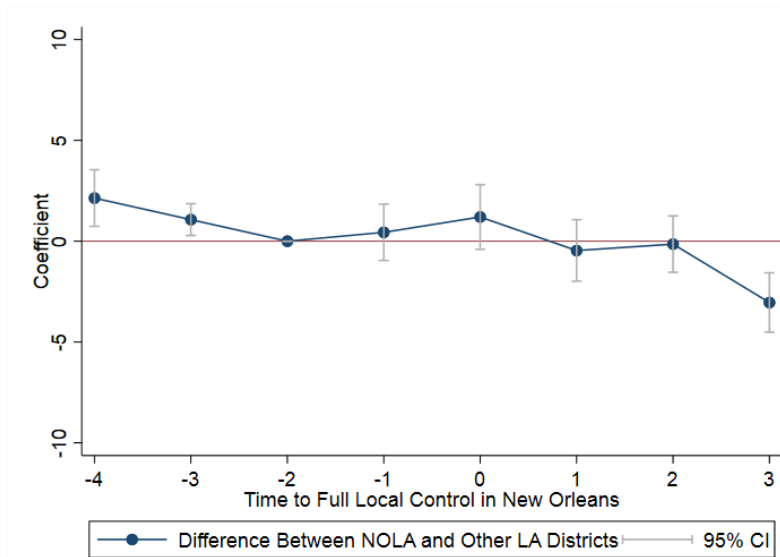
D. 8th Grade Math % Mastery or Above



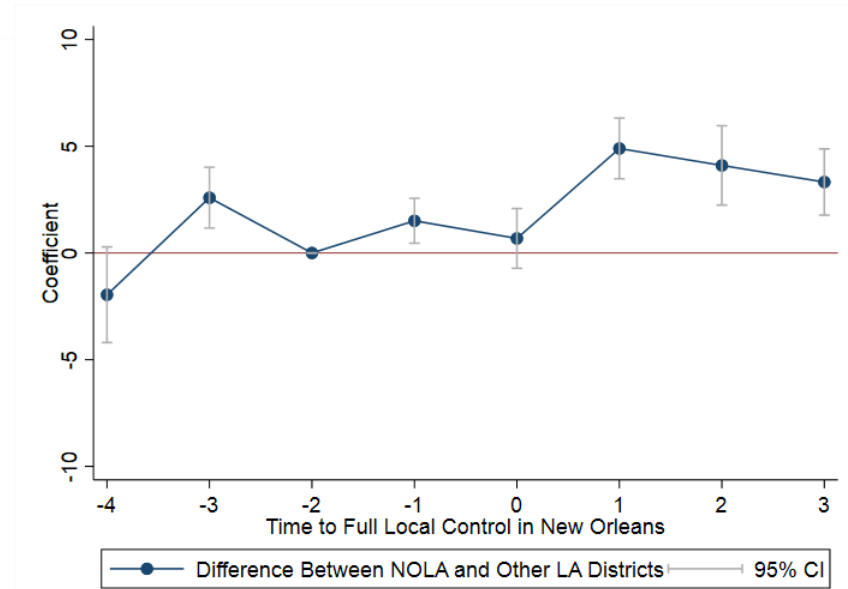
Note: Time 0 is the completion of reunification in the 2017-2018 school year. Baseline is the 2015-2016 school year, two years before the completion of reunification.

Figure 6: 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 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.

Figure 5 displays the event study results for test scores and Figure 6 displays the event study results for high school graduation and college enrollment. In all, the largest decline in student outcomes during and immediately after reunification occurred in 3rd grade English. We find declines at about half the magnitude for 8th grade English and math but increases or no significant difference for 3rd grade math, high school graduation, and college enrollment. These results suggest that students' learning experiences were largely unaffected by the changes in governance during reunification, however New Orleans students did face larger declines in student learning after the COVID-19 pandemic than students 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. 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 urban regime theory to understand the dynamics of power 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 direction of NOLA-PS. Although we do not find substantial changes in student outcomes after reunification, tension exists between school leaders, the community, and the school district in understanding the role of the school district in an all-charter PMM system. 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.

An important question remains regarding the future direction of NOLA-PS now that reunification has happened. What are the implications for students, educators, leaders, and the New Orleans community as a result of reunification? Despite this new form of local control of New Orleans schools, structural challenges still 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).

How does the reunification experience in NOLA compare to that of other state takeover districts? Though there has not been systematic research on this question, a review of local media and websites suggests similar patterns - full local control is often not realized. Most state laws allowing for state takeovers provide very little detail on how the schools can be returned to the local district, or even whether full local control is an aim, thus the process is often long and ends with more state involvement in the district than before the state takeover. For example, in Oakland, the financial operations of the district were monitored by a state actor after the district returned to local control (Kissel, 2022). In Newark, the state required a certain portion of the

local school district to have representatives of charter schools moving forward. In Detroit, an emergency manager has been in place since 2009, following a state takeover between 1999 and 2005. In most cases of state takeovers, especially in urban districts, the state government prescribed certain district operations once the district returned to local control, limiting the power of the local government. As we described here, the local district in New Orleans did not gain back the same powers it had before the state takeover, with most of the staffing and curriculum decisions located within charter schools and CMOs and limited powers of the elected school board.

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. The majority of students in the district are Hispanic and more than 1/3 have limited English proficiency. In fact, there are about 100 different languages spoken by students in the district given the large immigrant population in the city. 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.

The racialized nature of New Orleans public education reforms should not be ignored. The lack of economic and social investment specifically towards the Black community has impacted schooling experiences for students and families. Many New Orleans school policies have been led by an unelected and decentralized group of education reformers that have influenced what gets implemented (Scott, 2009). Often missing in this group of education reformers is the local Black community, who is directly impacted by what gets put into practice by policymakers. Often in urban educational settings, structural racism more so than personalized (or individual racism), permeates policies and practices that influence teaching and learning. Structural racism is evident in education, where often Black students are at a disadvantage due to social policies such as redlining, transportation inequality, or unequal access to healthy food and water, and inequities in resource distribution (Noguera & Alicea, 2020). White flight pre-and-post Hurricane Katrina has led to a school funding model based on an inequitable policy of property tax (Harris, 2020). Gentrification, environmental disasters, and

demographic shifts have shaped the social and physical landscape of New Orleans. We also posit that racial politics and economics have also impacted education, and who has influence on the future direction of urban education in the city.

In employing urban regime theory (URT), this study highlights how 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 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, ranging from elected officials to community stakeholders, negotiated among their various interests to develop a shared policy agenda. URT also highlights the dynamics underpinning the development of political arrangements that advanced and sustained the reunification agenda. A key component was the centering of local political and education contexts as key determinants of coalition-building efforts, and advancing NOLA-PS would organize and operate moving forward.

References

- Amos, S. K. (2010). The morphodynamics of modern education systems: on the relation between governance and governmentality as analytical tool in explaining current transformations. In *International educational governance* (Vol. 12, pp. 79-104). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Anderson, C. R., & Dixson, A. D. (2016). Down by the riverside: A CRT perspective on education reform in two river cities. *Urban Education, 51*(4), 363-389.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1997). *Qualitative research for education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bulkley, K., & Fisler, J. (2003). A decade of charter schools: From theory to practice. *Educational Policy, 17*(3), 317-342.
- Bulkley, K. E., Marsh, J. A., Strunk, K. O., Harris, D. N., & Hashim, A. K. (2021). *Challenging the one best system: The portfolio management model and urban school governance*. Harvard Education Press.
- Burns, P. (2003). Regime theory, state government, and a takeover of urban education. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 25*(3), 285-303.
- Cahen, C. (2023). Anticolonial realism: The defensive governing strategy of a Black city in white space. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City, 1-23*.
- Carnoy, M., & Loeb, S. (2002). Does external accountability affect student outcomes? A cross-state analysis. *Educational evaluation and policy analysis, 24*(4), 305-331.
- Chen, F., & Harris, D. N. (2022). How Do Charter Schools Affect System-Level Test Scores and Graduation Rates? A National Analysis. Policy Brief. *National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice*.
- Childs, J., & Russell, J. L. (2017). Improving low-achieving schools: Building state capacity to support school improvement through race to the top. *Urban Education, 52*(2), 236-266.
- Cibulka, J. G., & Derlin, R. L. (1998). Accountability policy adoption to policy sustainability: Reforms and systemic initiatives in Colorado and Maryland. *Education and Urban Society, 30*(4), 502-515.
- Cook, D. A., & Dixson, A. D. (2013). Writing critical race theory and method: A composite counterstory on the experiences of Black teachers in New Orleans post-Katrina. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 26*(10), 1238-1258.

- Dallavis, J. W., & Berends, M. (2023). Charter schools after three decades: Reviewing the research on school organizational and instructional conditions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 31.
- Dee, T. S., & Jacob, B. (2011). The impact of No Child Left Behind on student achievement. *Journal of Policy Analysis and management*, 30(3), 418-446.
- Dixson, A. D., Buras, K. L., & Jeffers, E. K. (2015). The color of reform: Race, education reform, and charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), 288-299.
- Dixson, A. D., Royal, C., & Henry Jr, K. L. (2013). School reform and school choice. In *Handbook of urban education* (pp. 512-541). Routledge.
- Fields, B. (2019). Post-Disaster Amenity Politics: Livability, Gentrification, and Recovery in Post-Katrina New Orleans. In *Community Livability* (pp. 123-136). Routledge.
- Gill, B., Zimmer, R., Christman, J., & Blanc, S. (2007). State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management, and Student Achievement in Philadelphia. *RAND Corporation*.
- Guo-Brennan, L., & Guo-Brennan, M. (2020). Global citizenship education and social justice for immigrant students: Implications for administration, leadership, and teaching in schools. *Handbook on promoting social justice in education*, 2203-2222.
- Harris, D. N. (2020). *Charter school city: What the end of traditional public schools in New Orleans Means for American education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, D. N. & Larsen, M. (Forthcoming). Taken by Storm: The Effects of Hurricane Katrina on Medium-Term Student Outcomes in New Orleans. *The Journal of Human Resources*
- Harris, D. N. & Martinez-Pabon, V. (2022). *Extreme Measures: A National Descriptive Analysis of Closure and Restructuring of Traditional Public, Charter, and Private Schools*. National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice.
- Harris, D. N., Liu, L., Barrett, N. & Li, R. (2023). Is the rise in high school graduation rates real? High-stakes school accountability and strategic behavior. *Labour Economics* 8, 102355.
- Hasselle, D. (2018, Nov 20). OPSB Superintendent Henderson Lewis touts unity, but community remains divided. *The Advocate*.
https://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/education/opsb-superintendent-henderson-lewis-touts-unity-but-community-remains-divided/article_cd1736ec-ec35-11e8-adb7-d33420be78ae.amp.html
- Henry, K. L. (2016). Discursive violence and economic retrenchment: Chartering the sacrifice of Black educators in post-Katrina New Orleans. In *The charter school solution* (pp. 80-98). Routledge.

- Henry Jr, K. L. (2021). "The price of disaster": The charter school authorization process in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 235-258.
- Henry Jr, K. L., & Dixon, A. D. (2016). "Locking the door before we got the keys" racial realities of the charter school authorization process in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 218-240.
- Hernández, L. E. (2022). Code switching and political strategy: The role of racial discourse in the coalition-building efforts of charter management organizations. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(2), 219-251.
- Hernández, L. E. (2022). Navigating politically muddy waters: Charter management organizations and their efforts to craft a counternarrative. *Urban Education*, 00420859221086510.
- Hill, P. T. (2006). Put Learning First: A Portfolio Approach to Public Schools. PPI Policy Report. *Progressive Policy Institute*.
- Hill, P. T., & Jochim, A. (2022). Education Reform That Sticks: Ten Years of "Portfolio Strategy" Efforts Reveal How to Navigate Politics and Change K-12 Public Education. *Center on Reinventing Public Education*.
- Jabbar, H. (2015). "Every kid is money" market-like competition and school leader strategies in New Orleans. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(4), 638-659.
- Kissell, R. E. (2022). Coercion and consent for the US education market: community engagement policy under racialized fiscal surveillance. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1-23.
- Lake, R. J. (2008). In the eye of the beholder: Charter schools and innovation. *Journal of School Choice*, 2(2), 115-127.
- Lay, J. C. (2022). *Public schools, private governance: Education reform and democracy in New Orleans*. Temple University Press.
- Lay, J. C., & Bauman, A. (2019). Private governance of public schools: Representation, priorities, and compliance in New Orleans charter school boards. *Urban Affairs Review*, 55(4), 1006-1034.
- Lubienski, C. (2001). Redefining "public" education: Charter schools, common schools, and the rhetoric of reform. *Teachers College Record*, 103(4), 634-666.
- Lugg, C. A., Bulkley, K., Firestone, W. A., & Garner, C. W. (2002). Section 2 Understanding the Challenges of School and District Leadership at the Dawn of a new Century: The Contextual Terrain Facing Educational Leaders. *Teachers College Record*, 104(9), 20-41.

- Mason, M. L., & Reckhow, S. (2017). Rootless reforms? State takeovers and school governance in Detroit and Memphis. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(1), 64-75.
- Martinez, M. J. (2020). Does school racial composition matter to teachers: Examining racial differences in teachers' perceptions of student problems. *Urban Education*, 55(7), 992-1020.
- Mitra, D. L., & Frick, W. C. (2011). Civic capacity in educational reform efforts: Emerging and established regimes in rust belt cities. *Educational Policy*, 25(5), 810-843.
- Morales-Doyle, D., & Gutstein, E. R. (2019). Racial capitalism and STEM education in Chicago Public Schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 22(4), 525-544.
- Morel, D. (2018). Race and state in the urban regime. *Urban Affairs Review*, 54(3), 490-523.
- Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Noguera, P. A., & Alicea, J. A. (2020). Structural racism and the urban geography of education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102(3), 51-56.
- Osworth, D. (2022). Looking Toward the Field: A Systematic Review to Inform Current and Future School Takeover Policy. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 4(1), 1-21.
- Preston, C., Goldring, E., Berends, M., & Cannata, M. (2012). School innovation in district context: Comparing traditional public schools and charter schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 318-330.
- Royal, C., & Gibson, S. (2017). They schools: Culturally relevant pedagogy under siege. *Teachers College Record*, 119(1), 1-25.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. sage.
- Schueler, B. E. (2019). A third way: The politics of school district takeover and turnaround in Lawrence, Massachusetts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(1), 116-153.
- Schueler, B. E., Goodman, J. S., & Deming, D. J. (2017). Can states take over and turn around school districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(2), 311-332.
- Schueler, B. E., Asher, C. A., Larned, K. E., Mehrotra, S., & Pollard, C. (2022). Improving low-performing schools: A meta-analysis of impact evaluation studies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(5), 975-1010.

- Schueler, B. E., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2022). Evaluating education governance: Does state takeover of school districts affect student achievement?. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 41(1), 162-192.
- Smith, M. S., & O'Day, J. (1990). Systemic school reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5(5), 233-267.
- Scott, J. (2009). The politics of venture philanthropy in charter school policy and advocacy. *Educational Policy*, 23(1), 106-136.
- Steinberg, M. P., & Cox, A. B. (2017). School autonomy and district support: How principals respond to a tiered autonomy initiative in Philadelphia public schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 130-165.
- Trujillo, T. M., Hernández, L. E., Jarrell, T., & Kissell, R. (2014). Community schools as urban district reform: Analyzing Oakland's policy landscape through oral histories. *Urban Education*, 49(8), 895-929.
- Welsh, R. O. (2018). Student mobility, segregation, and achievement gaps: Evidence from Clark County, Nevada. *Urban Education*, 53(1), 55-85.
- Welsh, R. O. (2019). Recovery, achievement, and opportunity: A comparative analysis of state takeover districts in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Georgia. *Urban Education*, 54(3), 311-338.
- Welsh, R. O., & Williams, S. M. (2018). Incentivizing Improvement or Imposition? An Examination of the Response to Gubernatorial School Takeover and Statewide Turnaround Districts. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(124), n124.
- Whelan, R. K., Young, A. H., & Lauria, M. (1994). Urban regimes and racial politics in New Orleans. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 16(1), 1-21.
- Woodward, S. M. (2020). *Will the Arts Come Marching In? Access to Arts Education Within the New Orleans Education Reform Movement*. Tulane University, Graduate Program in Biomedical Sciences.