

# DID THE TEACHERS DISMISSED AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA RETURN TO PUBLIC EDUCATION?



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## Overview

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish school district dismissed all of its employees as the city underwent a transition to a charter and choice-based system of charter schools. Using state employment files, we examine whether and how these teachers returned to public school employment in Louisiana. Our key findings are:

- Based on administrative data, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) dismissed approximately 4,300 teachers. This cohort of dismissed teachers included 71% black teachers and 78% female teachers, and had more than 15 years of average teaching experience.
- Approximately 50% of the dismissed teachers returned to work in administrative, teaching, or other positions in the state's publicly funded schools by fall 2007. Included in this number are two groups: 32% who were re-employed in New Orleans schools and 18% who were re-employed in other Louisiana Parishes.
- By 2013, these numbers had dropped substantially: 37% of the original pre-Katrina cohort was employed in Louisiana public schools, including 22% employed in New Orleans and 15% in other parishes.
- To compare our results with a typical teacher attrition rate, we looked at pre-Katrina New Orleans teachers' exits relative to exits by teachers with similar characteristics in other districts that also experienced hurricane effects. We estimate that teacher exit was 16-23 percentage points higher for the New Orleans teachers who were dismissed relative to similar non-New Orleans teachers in 2007, and 8-10 percentage points higher in 2013.

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## BACKGROUND

New Orleans experienced massive demographic, political, geographic, and policy changes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, including the complete restructuring of the city's public school system. From 2006 to 2014, state and local policymakers reformed the underperforming school district into the nation's first almost-all-charter district with citywide school choice, high-stakes accountability, and substantially decentralized school management. A particularly controversial aspect of the reforms was the dismissal of all New Orleans teachers and other school district employees.

In September of 2005, with the city evacuated and schools closed, the Orleans Parish school board (OPSB) placed all teachers on disaster leave without pay, enabling employees to collect unemployment benefits. The following March, OPSB terminated all employment contracts, initiating the largest mass firing of public school teachers in the nation's history. That spring, the district also allowed its collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) to expire with no effort at renegotiation.

Despite the media attention paid to the New Orleans teacher dismissal, little is known about the post-Katrina employment outcomes of teachers who were dismissed. This is the first study to use state employment records to provide evidence of re-employment.

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In this study, we measure the impact of the events in New Orleans on the teachers who were first physically displaced from their homes and schools, and then formally dismissed from public school employment. We address four main questions:

1. How many teachers were dismissed?

2. How many teachers returned to public school employment in Louisiana?
3. What were the characteristics of teachers who permanently exited after Katrina compared to those who returned?
4. To what extent were pre-Katrina teachers re-employed in New Orleans' reformed schools, including charter schools that opened after Katrina?

## HOW DID WE CONDUCT THIS ANALYSIS?

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) maintains records of all public school employees in the state, including employees of school districts and charter schools. For this study, we analyzed anonymized employee-level data from the school years beginning in 2004 through 2013. We are able to follow each employee across years, schools, and school districts, as long as she is employed by a public school in the state.

### *Identifying the Dismissed Teacher Cohort*

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans prior to the state's fall 2005 data collection, and no reliable records exist for New Orleans in that year. This means we cannot perfectly identify who was employed at the precise time of the dismissal. Instead, we use the full cohort of teachers who were employed in the prior school year (2004-05). Because we cannot perfectly observe the cohort of dismissed teachers, we are likely including some teachers who exited prior to Hurricane Katrina and excluding some teachers who entered in fall 2005.

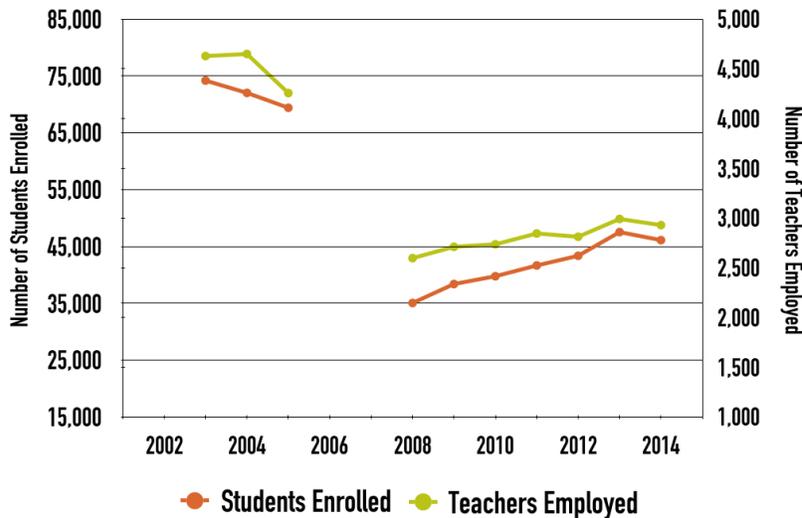
### *Measuring Post-Katrina Employment*

We identify pre-Katrina teachers employed by any public school in Louisiana, including charter schools. The data include all employees, which allows us to include not only teachers who return to the classroom but also teachers who transitioned to administrative positions and other roles in schools.

Our analysis of re-employment begins in fall 2007, the first year when there are reliable post-Katrina data for New Orleans schools. This year reflects early re-employment at a time when student enrollment was still low (relative to pre-Katrina) and the school district was still in transition. We also examine long-term employment in fall 2013. At that time, student enrollment had still

not returned to pre-Katrina levels but had stabilized, and nearly all public schools had completed the transition to charter schools. This is reflected in Figure 1, which shows that the hiring, including both new and returning teachers, largely tracked student enrollment levels both before and after the reforms.

**Figure 1. Student Enrollment and Total Teacher Employment in New Orleans Publicly Funded Schools**



We cannot observe whether teachers returned to private schools, public schools in other states, or educator positions in other kinds of organizations. Therefore, our measures of teacher employment likely underestimate return to employment overall.

### Comparison to Other Pre-Katrina Teachers

The likelihood of exiting teaching is not the same for all teachers. Factors such as age, training, and working conditions could influence the decision to exit the profession entirely or seek a new teaching position after dismissal. We use regression analysis to compare the employment outcomes of pre-Katrina New Orleans teachers who were dismissed to similar teachers from other school districts based on teacher demographics and school characteristics. We also attempt to measure separate effects of dismissal and school reform from the effects of evacuation and storm damage, by controlling for the local effects of population change and infrastructure damage related to hurricanes Katrina and Rita. However, New Orleans was impacted by Katrina in unique ways that are not comparable with any other districts. We cannot fully separate the combined effects of evacuation, flooding, and school reform from the effects of the dismissal for these teachers, and therefore, none of our results should be interpreted as causal effects of dismissal or school reform.

### HOW MANY TEACHERS WERE DISMISSED?

We identified 4,332 teachers in Orleans Parish in fall 2004. This is our best estimate of the number of teachers who were dismissed in spring 2006. This cohort included 71% black teachers. New Orleans teachers made up 8% of the total teacher workforce in Louisiana. The dismissed teacher cohort was more experienced than the state average, with 15.4 years of teaching experience. At the time of the

## Changes in School Options Post-Katrina

During the period of evacuation and school closure, the Louisiana Recovery School District (RSD) took over or closed most of the city’s schools. By fall 2007, there were three types of public schools in New Orleans, each offering different employment conditions:

- Seven OPSB direct-run schools were previously high-performing schools that continued to operate as traditional public schools under the governance of the local school board. Only OPSB direct-run schools offered preferred hiring for teachers who had been dismissed. Employment was based on a set salary schedule with state pension participation, but there was no longer a CBA in place with the local teachers’ union.
- Thirty-six RSD direct-run schools were previously low-performing schools that had been taken over by the state. RSD offered “priority consideration” but not priority hiring for dismissed teachers. Employment was based on a set salary schedule with state pension participation. All RSD direct-run employment was temporary since take-over schools were slated for closure or charter contracting by 2014.
- Thirty-one charter schools had opened by 2007. Some were high performing, but on average, most were previously low-performing schools or new start-ups with full control over teacher hiring, compensation, and dismissal. Charter schools were at-will employers of teachers with no union contracts or published salary schedules. State teacher pension participation occurred at the discretion of the charter operator.

dismissal, 31% were already eligible for full retirement benefits, based on having 25 or more years of experience as a Louisiana public school teacher.

## DID DISMISSED TEACHERS RETURN AFTER KATRINA?

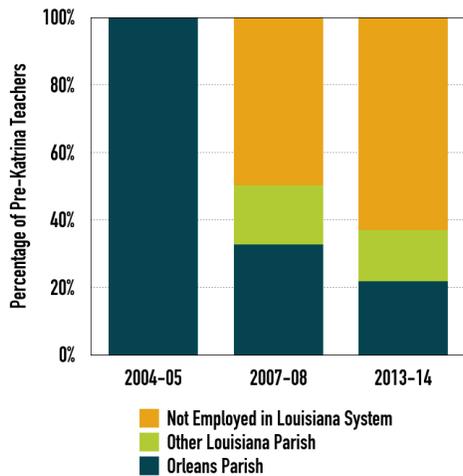
After the mass dismissal, teachers wanting to return to employment faced a very different labor market in New Orleans (See pull-out box on page 3). We first examine employment in 2007. At that time, the student population in the city was down 51% from pre-Katrina levels, reducing the number of teaching positions to be filled (See Figure 1).

From the cohort of 4,332 dismissed teachers, 50% had returned to teaching, administrative, or other positions in the state’s publicly funded schools by fall 2007, including 32% who returned to employment in New Orleans’ transformed public school system and 18% who transferred to other Louisiana parishes (Figure 2). Those employed in other parishes returned to unionized employment with salary schedules, state pension participation, and job security. Those who returned to work in New Orleans charter schools were at-will employees whose access to salary schedules and participation in the state pension system varied at the discretion of charter operators.

30 percentage-points higher than the New Orleans dismissed teacher cohort. Once we account for some measureable differences across districts and teachers using regression analysis, the difference drops somewhat, to 23 percentage points. After also trying to eliminate the role of the hurricane damage itself, this number dropped further. Overall, our best estimate is that the combined effects of dismissal and reform, separate from the hurricane effect, reduced the 2007 education employment of pre-Katrina New Orleans teachers by at least 16 percentage points.

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**Figure 2. Public School Employment of Pre-Katrina Teacher Cohort (N=4,332)**



## HOW MANY PRE-KATRINA TEACHERS WERE EMPLOYED IN THE LONG RUN?

Early re-employment statistics may reflect only initial resettling after evacuation. We look at fall 2013 employment to determine if, in the long run, pre-Katrina teachers permanently exited public school employment or returned.

By fall 2013, student enrollment increased and spread across 87 schools. We find that 22% of the original cohort of dismissed teachers were employed in New Orleans public schools in fall 2013, and 15% of dismissed teachers were employed in publicly funded schools in other parishes. 63% of dismissed teachers were no longer employed in Louisiana public schools.

Public school employment in 2013 was 20 percentage points lower for New Orleans teachers compared to 2004-05 teachers from other parishes. Results from our regression analysis suggest that 2013 public school employment of pre-Katrina teachers was 8-11 percentage points lower than expected, based on comparisons to similar teachers and controlling for hurricane-related damage.

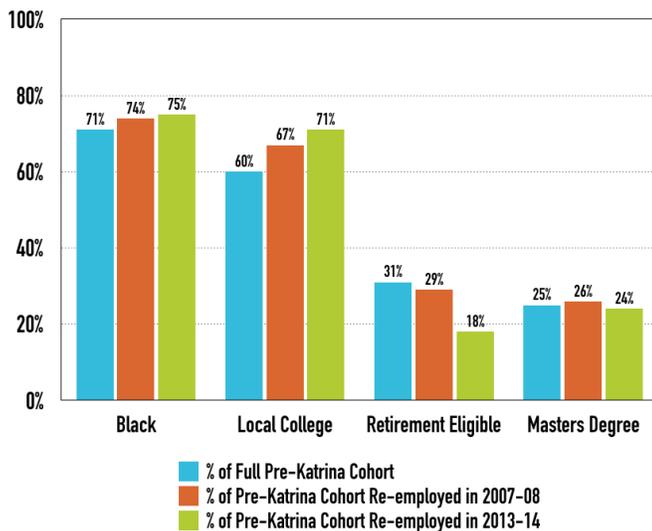
Some of this exit is due to natural attrition (such as retirement), so we compared the 2007 employment rate for New Orleans pre-Katrina teachers to teachers with similar characteristics from other parishes that were affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita but did not experience mass dismissal or school reform. Among 2004-05 teachers from other Louisiana parishes, 80% were still employed in 2007-08,

## WHAT WERE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISMISSED COHORT AND THOSE TEACHERS WHO RETURNED?

Within the full cohort of dismissed teachers, teachers were less likely to return to public school employment if they had fewer than 4 years of teaching experience. At the other extreme, teachers were also less likely to return if they had more than 25 years of teaching experience. This group was eligible to retire immediately upon dismissal and begin receiving pension benefits.

Figure 3 shows the demographics of teachers from the pre-Katrina cohort re-employed in New Orleans publicly funded schools after the storm. Note that the percentages for 2007-08 and 2013-14 reflect only re-employed members of the dismissed cohort who share a given characteristic. These percentages do not reflect of the overall teaching population in New Orleans.

**Figure 3. Demographics of Pre-Katrina Teacher Cohort Employed in New Orleans Publicly Funded Schools After the Storm**



Controlling for pre-Katrina teacher and school characteristics, we find that teachers who attended local or other Louisiana colleges were more likely to return to employment than those who were educated out-of-state. By fall 2013, we find that teachers who had master’s degrees prior to Katrina were more likely to be employed than teachers with a bachelor’s only, while those who taught at failing pre-Katrina schools were less likely to be employed than those who taught at non-failing schools.

We also find no difference in overall reemployment rates by teacher gender, or by the demographics of students in the teacher’s pre-Katrina school.

Discussions of the teacher dismissal often focus on the inequities associated with these reforms. Of particular concern is the unequal impact of the dismissal on the black middle class. We estimate that 3,076 black teachers were among the dismissed teacher cohort. By fall 2007, approximately half of the pre-Katrina black teacher cohort had exited public school employment in the state, growing to 62% in 2013.

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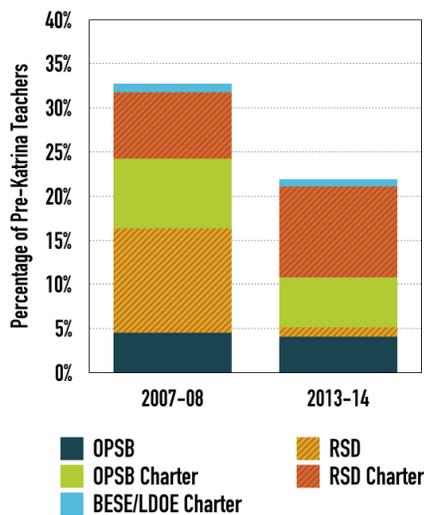
We find that black teachers, white teachers, and other race teachers were equally likely to return to employment in 2007, but black teachers were more likely than white teachers to remain in public school employment through 2013 by approximately 4 percentage points. Black teachers were substantially less likely to move to other districts and more likely to return to New Orleans, compared to white teachers with similar pre-Katrina qualifications and from similar school settings.

## TO WHAT EXTENT WERE THE PRE-KATRINA TEACHERS RE-EMPLOYED IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF PUBLICLY FUNDED NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS?

By fall 2007, 1,420 New Orleans pre-Katrina teachers had been rehired by publicly funded schools in New Orleans. An additional 757 teachers had dispersed to employment in other parishes. Of those who returned to New Orleans, the largest group of teachers was employed in charter schools, including many previously low-performing schools that RSD had transitioned to charter

management. We also find pre-Katrina teachers employed in the remaining OPSB direct-run public schools and RSD-managed schools. By fall 2013, RSD charter schools comprised the largest group of schools in New Orleans, and Figure 4 shows that these schools employed the largest share of pre-Katrina teachers.

**Figure 4. Pre-Katrina Teacher Cohort Re-Employment in New Orleans Publicly Funded Schools by School Type**



More experienced teachers were more likely to be re-employed in OPSB-managed schools than charter schools or RSD-managed schools. This difference appears in 2007 and remains through 2013. OPSB provided employees continued access to state pension benefits, while retirement benefits varied in charter schools. We also find that teachers who attended local or other Louisiana colleges were more likely to be employed in charter schools, and teachers who taught at failing schools prior to dismissal were more likely to work in RSD-managed schools. We find that black teachers were significantly more likely to return to New Orleans public schools than whites. Among teachers who returned, black teachers were less likely than whites to be employed in charter schools, and more likely to be re-employed by OPSB.

## DISCUSSION

The dismissal of the entire New Orleans public school teacher workforce was a particularly controversial component of the reforms that took place following Hurricane Katrina. In addition to the losses directly inflicted by the effects of the hurricane, these teachers faced unemployment and dramatically altered prospects for future employment.

While the educational implications here are ambiguous, what is clear is that the mass dismissals have had a lasting impact on the teachers themselves, their families, and the community. This will be part of the public discourse on the New Orleans school reforms for many years to come.

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

Teachers are an integral part of students' success, and as such, they are a central part of the ERA-New Orleans research agenda. The following policy briefs explore our published and upcoming studies on topics related to teachers.

Nathan Barrett and Douglas N. Harris describe changes in the composition of the teacher workforce in their policy brief, *Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce*.

In *Teachers' Perspectives on Learning and Work Environments Under the New Orleans School Reforms*, Lindsay Bell Weixler, Douglas N. Harris, and Nathan Barrett analyze changes in New Orleans teachers' learning and work environments using surveys of teachers who were dismissed after Hurricane Katrina but returned to teach in the city's publicly funded schools.

In *When Tenure Ends: Teacher Turnover in Response to Policy Changes in Louisiana*, Katharine Strunk, Nathan Barrett, and Jane Arnold Lincove study the effects of Louisiana's near-elimination of tenure protections on teachers' persistence in the teacher workforce.

In *How Do Schools Respond to State Policies on Teacher Evaluation?*, Julie Marsh, Susan Bush-Mecenas, Katharine Strunk, Jane Arnold Lincove, and Alice Huguet examine how New Orleans schools implemented a state policy requiring more rigorous teacher evaluation, reinforcing the idea that implementation can be as important as design when considering how policies affect learning and work environments.

In another series of studies, we will be examining how teachers and school leaders are paid to see if charter schools offer financial incentives for educators to take challenging positions and improve student performance.

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## About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

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

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**EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org**

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