The New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms:

20 Years of Lessons

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EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS

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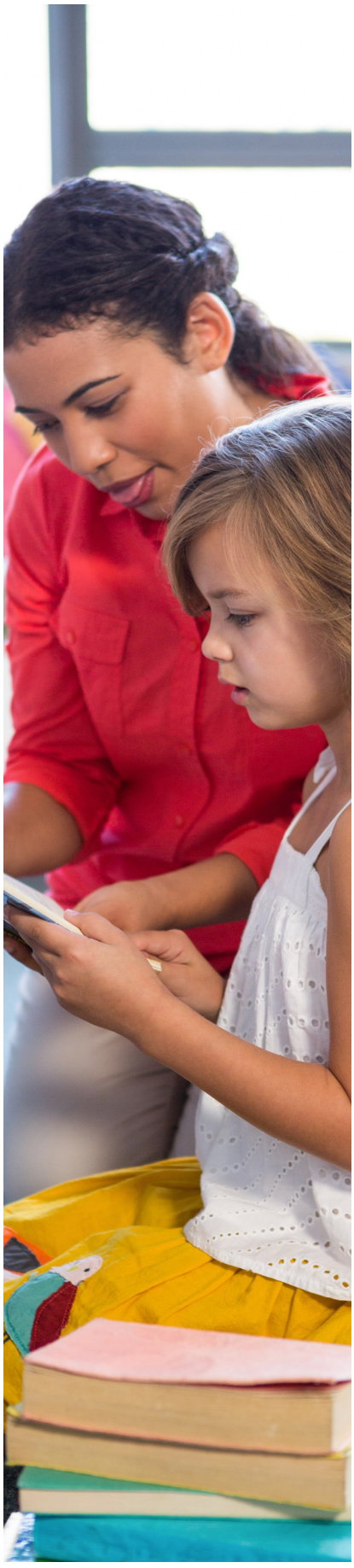
Introduction

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans on August 29, 2005 and was one of the most devastating disasters in American history. Even two decades later, its after-effects are felt here on a daily basis. "The storm", as we call it, also shaped many of the city's core institutions—none more so than our K-12 schools.

Almost all New Orleans public schools were taken over by the state and eventually turned into autonomous charter schools. All educators were fired, and the union contract was allowed to expire. Almost all attendance zones were eliminated so that families, in principle, could choose any publicly funded school in the city. By the end of the state takeover 13 years later, all of the city's schools were converted to charter schools, and New Orleans schools were reunified into one district governed by the local school board and superintendent. While other cities in the U.S. have expanded their charter school offerings during state takeover periods, no city has gone as far as New Orleans. One of the missions of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to understand these reforms.

This report offers a summary of all our findings to date. Having released more than 60 policy briefs and technical reports, we believe it is important to show how our findings fit together and what larger lessons they might provide for policymakers and practitioners. As with our policy briefs, the key conclusions below are based not only on our individual findings, but also on patterns across our studies and analyses by other researchers.

A much more extensive discussion and interpretation can be found in the book *Charter School City*, written by ERA-New Orleans director Douglas N. Harris.



Background: Katrina and New Orleans Schools

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 state and federal agencies, decisions about the rebuilding efforts were made quickly and without much community input. No sector was affected as much as education. Reopening schools became a top priority so citizens could return and participate in the rebuilding of the city, but what kinds of schools would they return to?

Pressure for change in New Orleans education had been building for many years before the storm. At the time of the storm, student achievement, high school graduation, and college-going ranked at or near the bottom of the state, which itself was second worst in the country. These low academic outcomes in the city were often attributed to a history of financial mismanagement, corruption, and instability within the school district. Despite these low outcomes, other aspects of New Orleans schools before the storm were positive: they had strong cultural ties to the community, made students feel connected and respected, and exhibited and promoted Black collective identity.

A group of local, state, and national individuals from inside and outside of politics and education, which we refer to as the "reformers," viewed Katrina as an opportunity to push educational initiatives that had been building in the state for years. In the 1990s, the state built a test-based accountability system, long before the federal No Child Left Behind Act required it. The state also passed a charter school law in 1995, which was expanded in 2003. In 2004, the state created the Recovery School District (RSD), allowing the state to take control over individual schools that failed to meet state standards for four years. Five New Orleans schools 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.

In the aftermath of Katrina, the reformers worked with the Louisiana Legislature to pass Act 35, which changed the criteria for RSD takeovers so that any schools performing below the state average in New Orleans were put under state control.

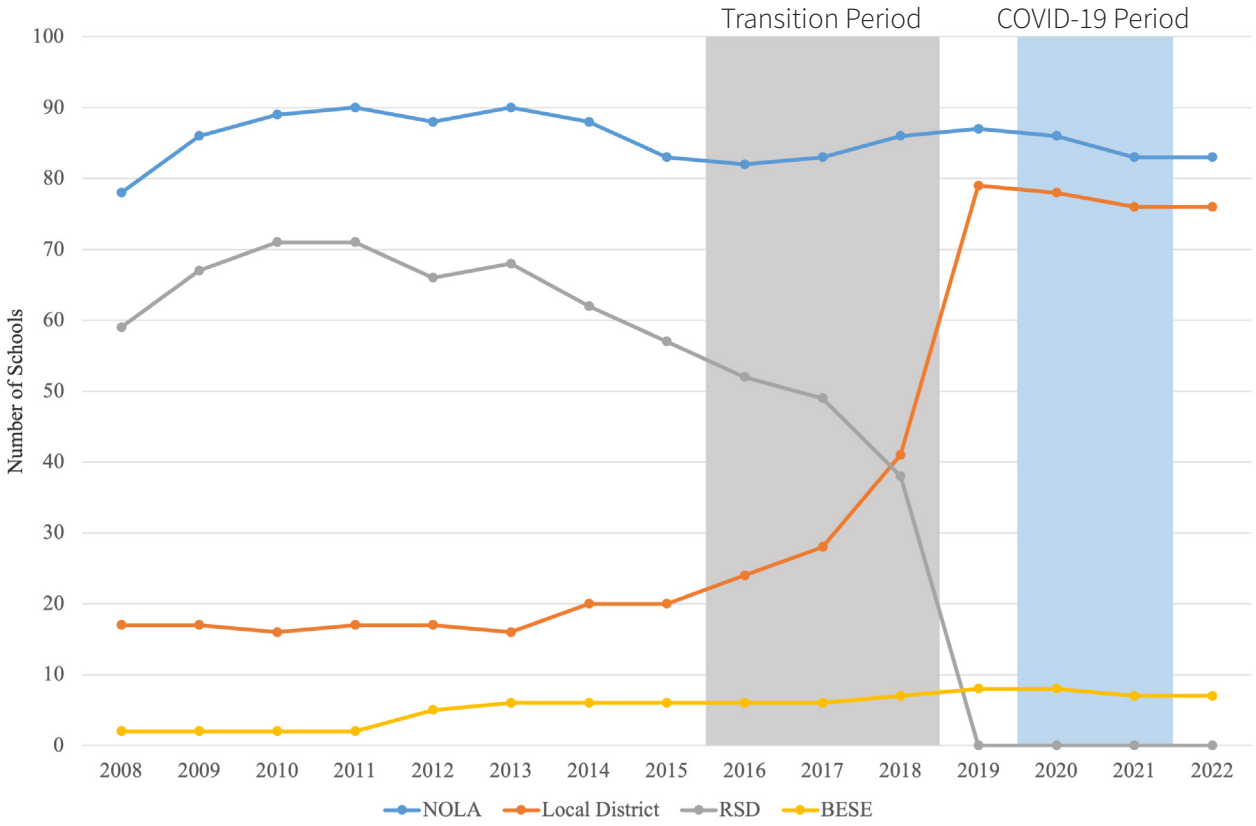
Attendance zones were eliminated, the local district ended the union contract, and all teachers were fired and had to reapply for their jobs. These teachers were labeled as "not-qualified" or "not meeting standard" without any individual evaluation process, which led to further distrust, especially among Black teachers, of the education reform efforts. In addition, the RSD assumed control of the facilities for the schools it took over and oversaw federal FEMA funds to rebuild those damaged by the storm.

Act 35 was not a complete state takeover of the district as the local district still governed the 13 New Orleans schools that performed above the state average at the time of the storm. The local district also largely followed the RSD's lead. For example, the district also converted their schools into charter schools to enable the quick reopening of schools after the storm and bring in additional financial resources. As a result, this was arguably the most sweeping district reform in American history.

At the 10th anniversary of Katrina, in 2015, all of the RSD schools and the majority of Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools had been converted to charters and the state began planning the end of the state takeover, a process called "reunification." The same reformers who orchestrated the state takeover began working with the RSD and local district to align certain policies and practices to enable a smooth transition to local governance. Creating a centralized enrollment system for all New Orleans schools, agreeing to a differentiated funding formula, and sharing facility resources were critical parts of this alignment. In May of 2016, the Louisiana Legislature passed the reunification law, Act 91, which required all New Orleans schools under the state RSD to transition their governance to the local school district within two years. By the summer of 2018, 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.

Figure 1 displays the number of schools in New Orleans by governance before, during, and after reunification. While reunification moved charter agreements from the state to the local district, it did not change the day-to-day operations of schools, which remained under the purview of each individual charter school or Charter Management Organization (CMO).

Figure 1. Number of schools in New Orleans by governance

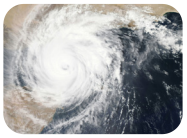


Notes: RSD includes schools governed by the Recovery School District. BESE includes schools governed by the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Local District includes schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board. The gray area signifies the two years after Act 91 was passed when schools were required to return to the governance of the local district. The blue area signifies the two school years most impacted by COVID-19. The years represent the spring of the school year (2022 is the 2021-2022 school year).

Below, we provide more details about our key conclusions and link to key studies, both from ERA-New Orleans and others. It is important to emphasize that many of the analyses included in this report summarize findings from the first decade of the reforms. Data and evaluation resources were more readily available during this period and it is when most of the changes in schools occurred. Where possible, we have reported other suggestive evidence about whether the conclusions have likely changed.

Timeline of Education Reforms in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina

August, 2005



Hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans.

Fall, 2005

Louisiana legislature passes Act No. 35, which shifted control of almost all New Orleans schools to the state's Recovery School District. Teachers fired.

March, 2014

OPSB and RSD sign a cooperative endeavor agreement that aligns policies across the two school systems.

January, 2015

Dr. Henderson Lewis selected as Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) superintendent, with a plan to create a portfolio school district with a minimal central office.

May, 2016

Louisiana legislature passes Act No. 91, which mandates the return of all New Orleans schools to local control by July 2018. Unanimous vote in the senate, 54-17 in the house.

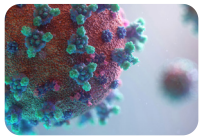
July, 2018

All schools return to local governance, but still as charter schools.

December, 2018

OPSB votes for McDonogh 35, the last direct-run school in New Orleans, to transition to a charter school under InspireNOLA.

March, 2020



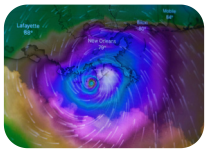
Schools shutdown for COVID-19.

September-October, 2020

Schools return to in person instruction.

January, 2021

Schools move to virtual instruction with new wave of COVID-19 infections.



August-September, 2021

Hurricane Ida hits the New Orleans area, causing widespread damage and power outages that led to school closures.

July, 2022

Dr. Avis Williams begins tenure as superintendent, the first woman to hold the role.

May, 2022

State legislature votes down SB 404, which would have allowed the school board to decide what level of autonomy charter operators have.

February, 2024

School board votes to open local district run school, the Leah Chase School, for 2024-2025 school year.

June, 2024

Governor signs bill to create the LA Gator Scholarship Program, altering and expanding the previous voucher program and creating an education savings account for all students.

December, 2024

Dr. Avis Williams resigns as superintendent. Dr. Fateama Fulmore becomes superintendent the following April.

Conclusion #1: Improved Student Outcomes

The New Orleans reforms led to large gains in average student achievement and increased rates of high school graduation, college entry, and college graduation in the first decade after they were implemented. Student outcomes have stabilized since then.

We analyzed the effects of the reforms on student outcomes using a number of methods that compare New Orleans students to similar ones in other districts that did not experience the school reforms. This helps to ensure that New Orleans did not improve based on factors that were affecting the entire state.

We find that test scores rose by 11-16 percentiles compared with these similar students and districts, depending on the subject and analysis method. (Figure 2 shows just the difference between New Orleans and the other districts, so the rising line to the right means that New Orleans improved faster.) Other important indicators rose as well: the high school graduation rate increased by 3-9 percentage points, college entry rates grew by 8-15 percentage points and college graduation rates grew 3-5 percentage points. The quality of colleges that students attended and some measures of college persistence also increased, while others were unchanged.

Early on, critics considered several other potential explanations for these gains, including that the hurricane had changed the population and which students were attending New Orleans schools. However, we have tested these alternative explanations and find that the school reforms caused the vast majority of the improved outcomes. (School funding is an additional possible explanation. See Conclusion #4.)

Figure 2: Student test scores increased for all tested subjects in New Orleans, as well as college entry and graduation rates.

Figure 2.A: Math Scores

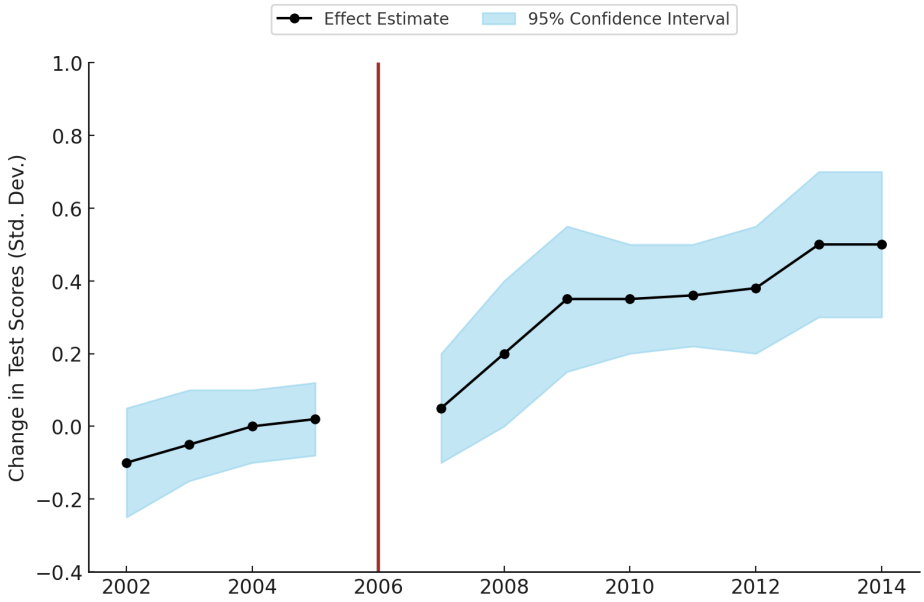


Figure 2.B: ELA Scores

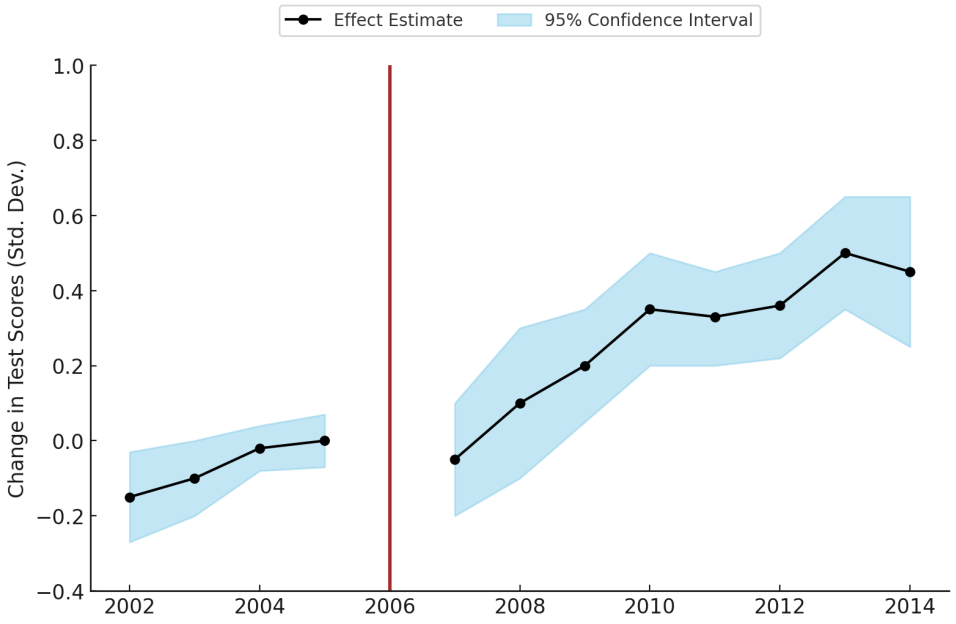


Figure 2.C: College Entry Rates

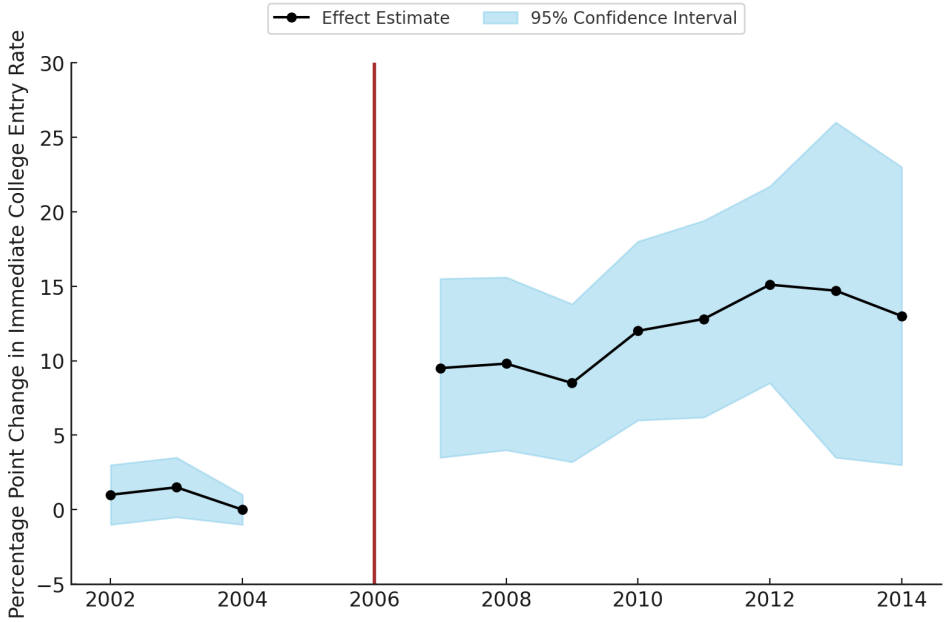
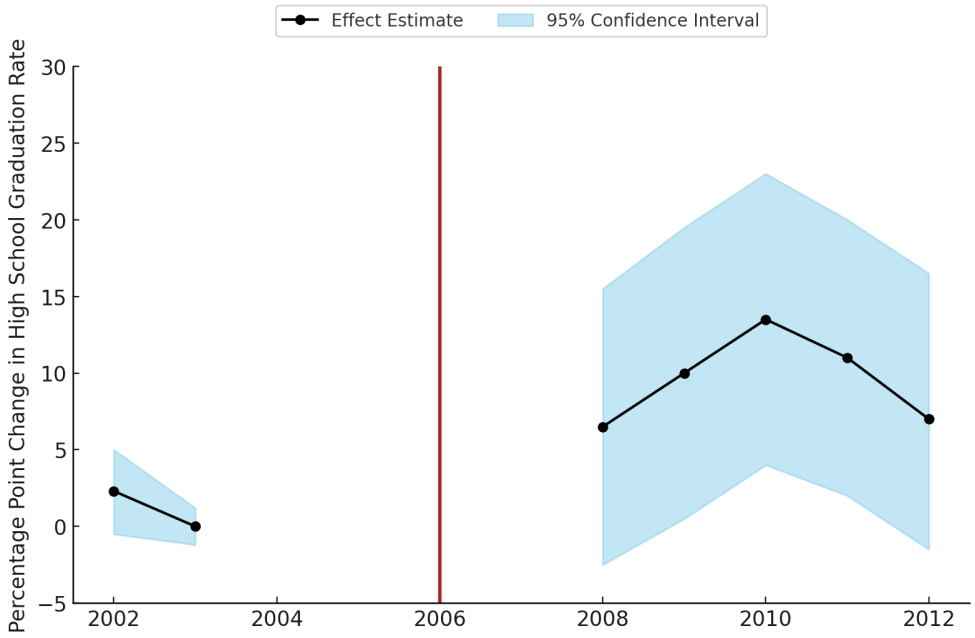


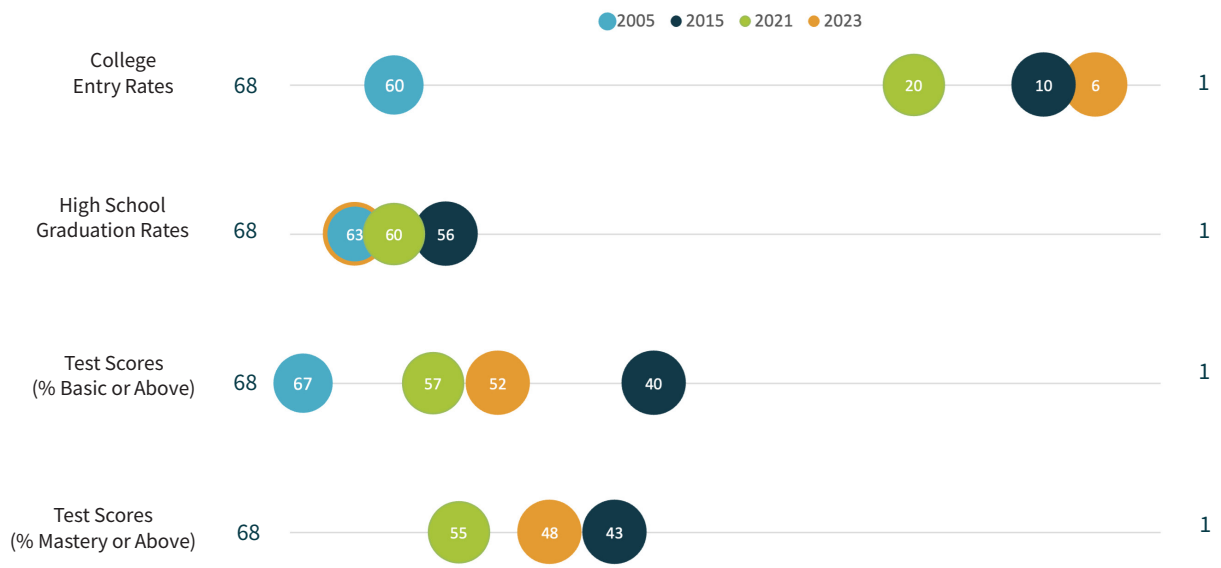
Figure 2.D: High School Graduation Rates



Notes: The above figures show difference-in-differences estimates (dark lines) with 95% confidence intervals. For figures on math and ELA test scores, the analysis uses the typical research practice of standardizing test scores to a statewide mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The y-axis for the test score figures shows the effects in terms of standard deviations.

As shown in Figure 3, the district moved from near the bottom of the state on most measures to near the state average. Most student outcomes peaked around the 10-year anniversary of Katrina (2015) and have since plateaued. At the same time, Louisiana increased its standard for test scores from "Basic" to "Mastery", which could explain the different trends for the two test levels. New Orleans students did experience steeper declines in test scores after the COVID-19 pandemic than in districts across the state, but they have also made up for these declines in most outcomes over the past two years.

Figure 3: New Orleans schools ranked at the bottom of the state when Katrina hit, but have moved up to the middle on most outcomes.



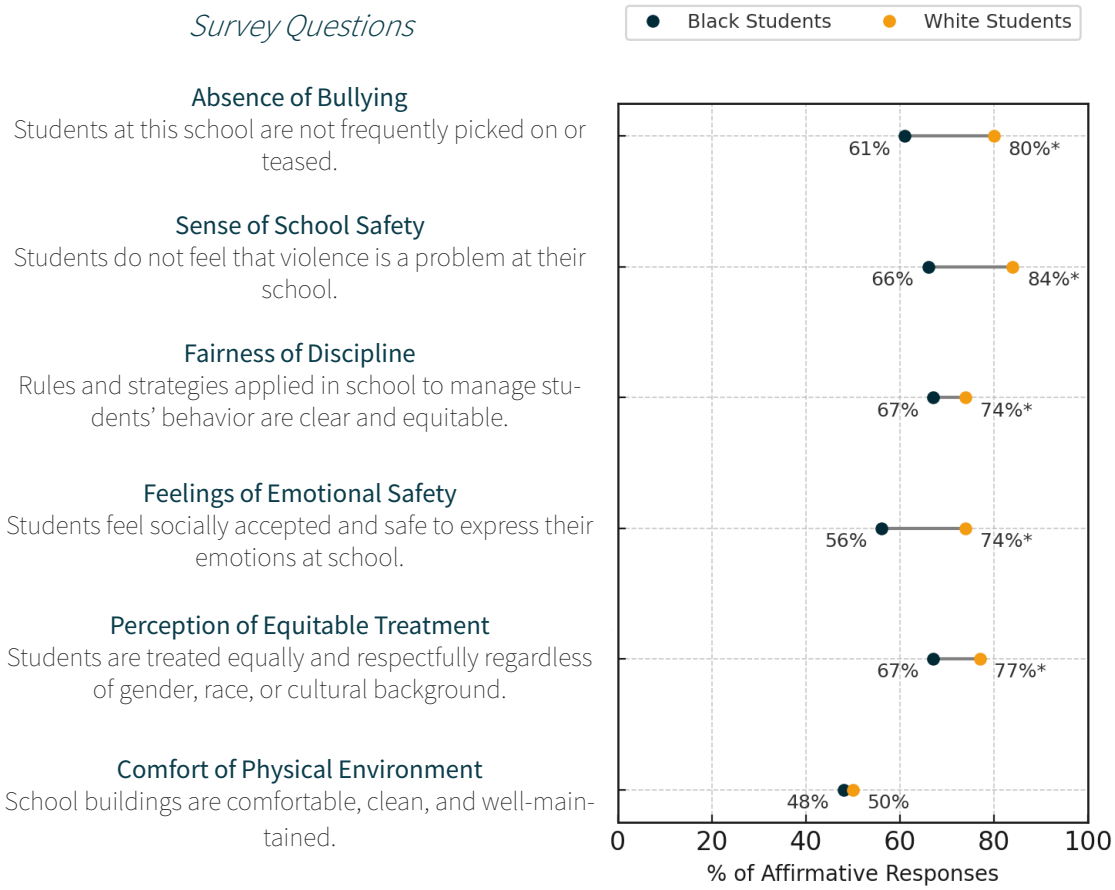
Notes: Test scores are district-level averages of the percent of students reaching the benchmark specified in Math and ELA in grades 3-8, weighted by the number of students in that grade level. We do not have data on the % of students reaching mastery in 2005. High school graduation is the district-level average of the Cohort Graduation Rate. College entry is the district-level average of the percent of students entering college in the first fall after graduating high school, weighted by the number of students in each high school.

Conclusion #2: Greater Equity but Wide Gaps Remain

Equity in educational outcomes improved in some areas, but wide gaps by socio-economic status and race/ethnicity remain in discipline practices, school climate, and segregation in schools.

The reforms helped reduce educational opportunity gaps for Black and low-income students, at least in terms of high school graduation rates and college outcomes. Results are more mixed in terms of test scores. Some results show that opportunity gaps in test scores worsened, and others suggest no change. We also found differences in students' perceptions by race/ethnicity; our survey of New Orleans youth in the 2018-19 school year found that Black students reported less positive educational environments than White students (Figure 4). That survey also found smaller but significant racial gaps on questions related to teaching quality.

Figure 4: Black students in New Orleans perceive poorer school climates than White students.



Notes: An asterisk denotes that the difference between Black and White students' ratings was statistically significant.

Our second survey of New Orleans youth in the 2021-22 school year found similar disparities. Our third survey is in process this school year. Unlike most of our other work, we do not have survey data from before Katrina and therefore cannot determine whether these disparities are related to the reforms.

There were additional troubling signs of inequity in the first several years of the reforms: schools apparently selected students rather than students choosing schools. The expulsion rates increased 1.5-2.7 percentage points (140-250%) in the early years. This finding has implications for racial equity, since across the state of Louisiana, Black students were twice as likely as White students to be suspended.

Over time, several of these consequences were alleviated as the city re-centralized certain aspects of the school system, including implementing a citywide expulsion system and a common enrollment system called the OneApp/NCAP (NOLA-PS Common Application Process). Suspension and expulsion rates returned to near pre-Katrina levels. Some schools have significantly reduced suspensions through the use of alternative behavioral management systems such as Positive Behavior Intervention Systems and restorative practices.

Finally, there were fears that charter schools would increase segregation. At the high school level, we find evidence for increased segregation by race and income, but not by special education status. We find no strong evidence of increased segregation at the elementary school level. In fact, enrollment of Black and other nonwhite students increased in high-performing schools after they joined the centralized enrollment system. However, in one respect, equitable access has worsened. A policy change instituted in 2019 prioritizes admission at most elementary schools for applicants who live within a half-mile of the school. We find that this gives White and high-income students an advantage in securing a seat at high-demand schools.

Conclusion #3: Continued School Takeovers Drove Success

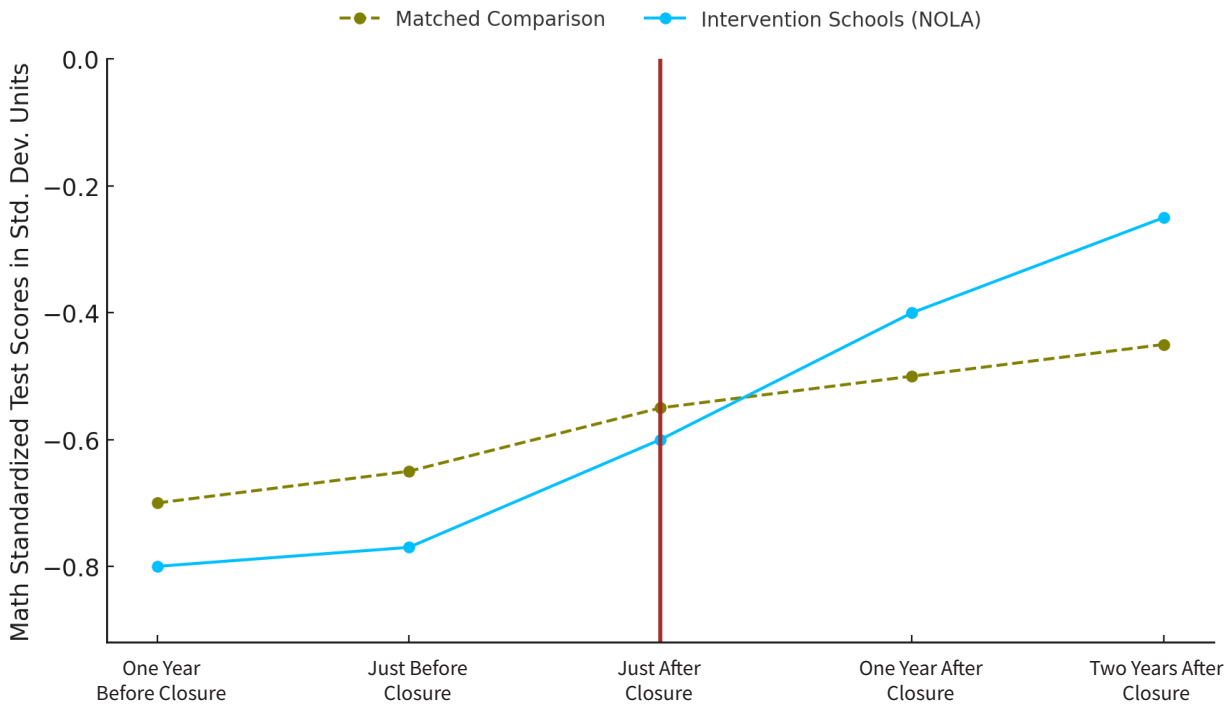
A key factor driving improvement in average academic performance was the gradual process of closing and taking over low-performing schools.

Under the reforms, non-profit management organizations are hired to operate schools via performance-based contracts. If schools do not meet their benchmarks, then their contracts are not renewed, resulting in school closure or takeover by another non-profit management organization. This process has driven essentially all of the post-Katrina improvement. This was especially true in the first decade after Katrina; low-performing schools were replaced by higher-performing ones, which gradually lifted average student achievement.

There are multiple ways in which school closure and takeover can play a role, including replacing low-performing school operators with higher performers and creating pressure on schools to improve. On the other hand, it could be that students attending schools that are closed or taken over experience negative effects. We find that this is not the case, at least for elementary and middle schools (see Figure 5). If school governing bodies close or takeover the lowest performing schools, then even the students disrupted by this change still end up with outcomes that are at least as good as they would have been if the schools did not close. We have also found that providing priority and support to students in closed schools helps them end up in better schools the following school year.

The situation is a bit different in high schools since students have few years to adjust prior to on-time graduation. A change in school at this age might throw students off the path to graduation, though likely does help younger cohorts starting high school in the future.

Figure 5: Students in schools that were closed or taken over experienced significant improvements in student achievement.



Notes: Figure 5 shows the math outcomes of individual students in closure/takeover schools before and after their schools closed compared with a matched comparison group of students with similar low achievement. The last two data points show scores for students one and two years after entering a new school.

Given the focus of the reforms on performance-based contracts, the choice of performance metrics is critically important. School performance contracts reflect state accountability systems and generally reward schools based on students' average test scores. However, since students come to school with different initial achievement levels, this tends to unfairly punish schools serving the most disadvantaged students. In contrast, "growth" measures account for where students start at the beginning of the year.

Our research finds that if government agencies gave growth measures equal weight to average test scores in their school performance ratings, then 24.2% of elementary schools and 32.9% of high schools in Louisiana would change performance categories (e.g., moving from a letter grade of F to D). Since changing letter grades would also affect which schools are shut down for low performance, we estimate this change in measurement alone would increase annual student test scores for the bottom fifth of all schools statewide by about 0.4 percentiles and increase the statewide high school graduation rate by 0.4 percentage points. (In Conclusion #8, we also discuss some other consequences of performance-based contracts).

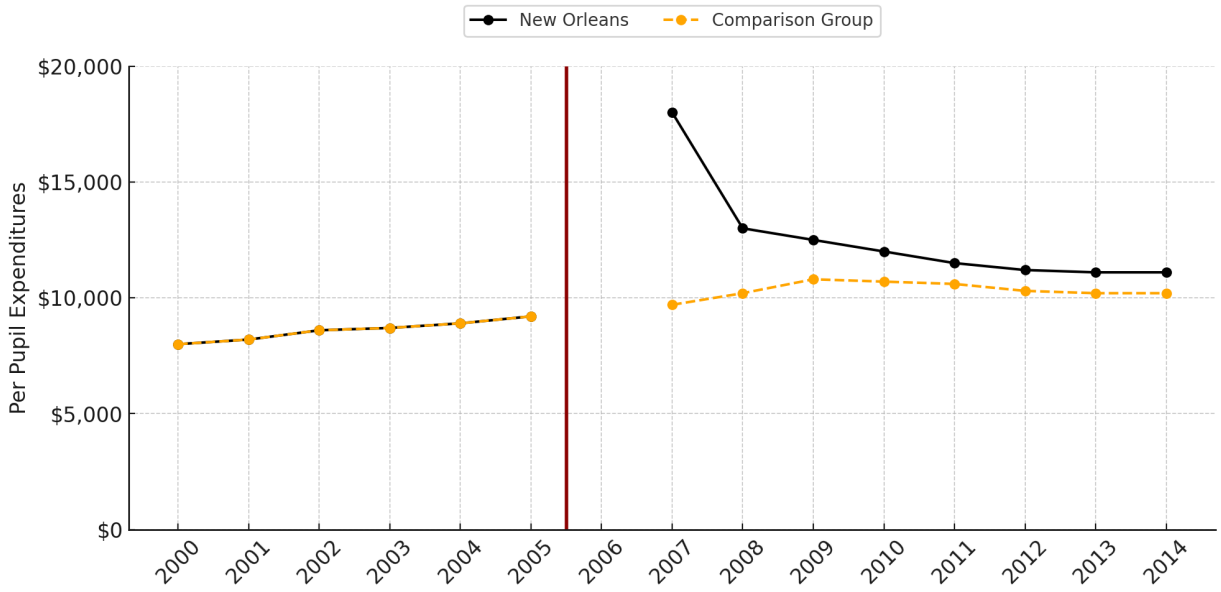
The takeover process succeeded in New Orleans because the RSD and, more recently, NOLA-PS, closed schools based substantially on achievement growth. This is uncommon in school improvement efforts nationally where the focus is more on achievement levels.

Conclusion #4: Increased Spending

A 13% increase in school spending likely contributed to student gains. However, these funds were used mainly to cover an increase in administrative spending. Instructional spending declined.

School spending increased relative to comparison districts because of changes in both government funding and increased philanthropic dollars (Figure 6). This remained true even after the initial spike in spending, which was apparently due to the slow return of students combined with the start-up costs for the new system.

Figure 6: The reforms increased operating spending.

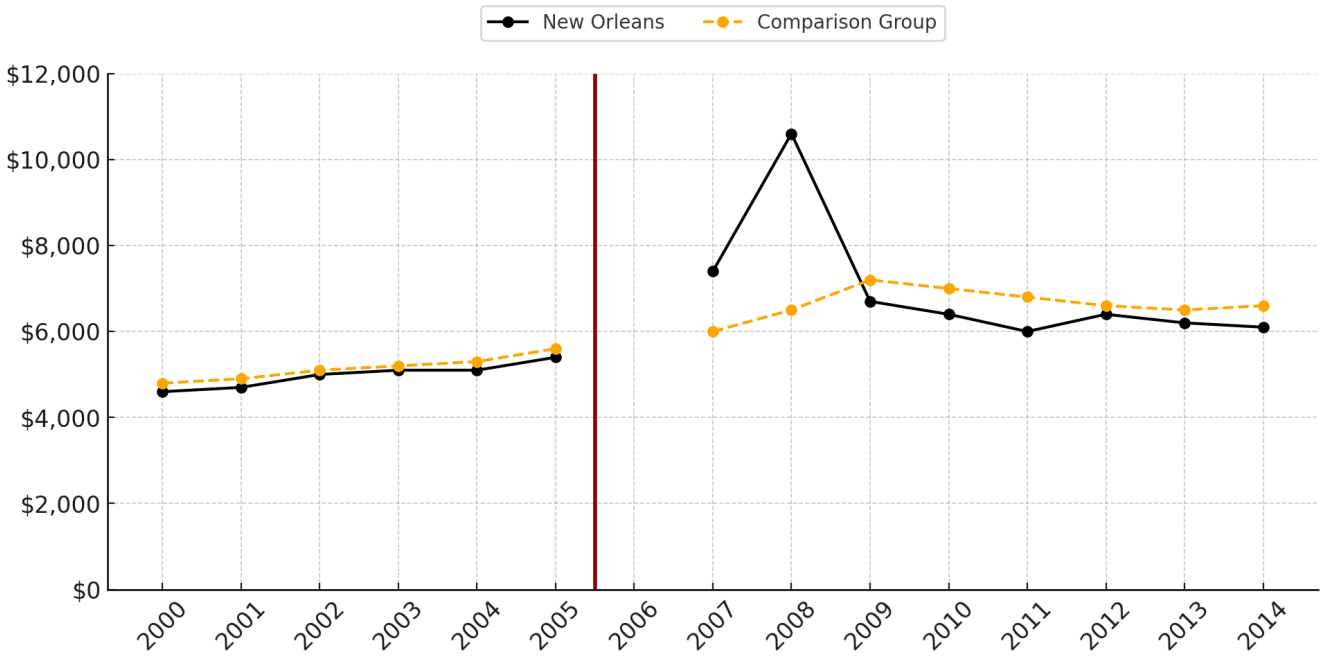


Notes: The vertical line in the middle of the figure indicates the year of the hurricane. After that, the reforms started, and we see sharp and persistent changes in spending levels. By 2014, New Orleans' operating expenditures were 13% ($1,358 per pupil) higher than the comparison group.

Increased spending probably explains some portion of the reform effects, but debate remains about how much it contributed to students' improved academic outcomes. Our research suggests that the increased revenues were partly driven by the reforms themselves, as public support for spending increased. Also, pre-Katrina schools were generally ineffective in converting school resources into school improvement, so increasing school spending alone very likely would not have generated the outcomes described above without the reforms.

We have also studied how publicly funded schools in New Orleans spent these additional funds. In the first decade of the reforms, instructional spending decreased by 10% ($706 per student) relative to the comparison group (Figure 7). This reduction was partly driven by reduced teacher experience and money spent on staff benefits. We are aware of no new evidence about whether spending patterns have continued to evolve after 2015.

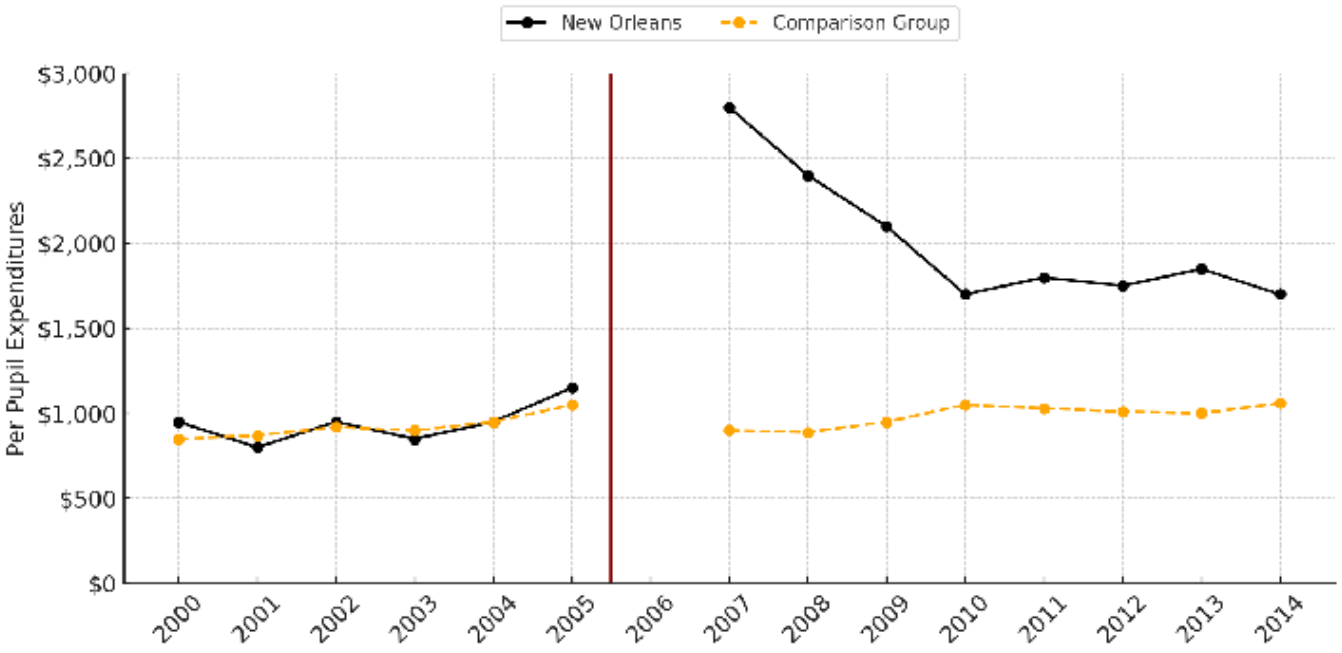
Figure 7: The reforms reduced instructional spending.



Notes: Figure 7 shows instructional spending for New Orleans publicly funded schools and for a matched comparison group from other traditional school districts.

As shown in Figure 8, there was also higher spending on administration (an increase of 66% or $699 per student), which could be explained by the loss of economies of scale in this decentralized system. Administrative spending includes responsibilities at the school- and district-level that contribute to administrator salaries, planning, evaluation, information, and technology. The educational models of charter schools involve higher management costs and perhaps a more top-heavy approach; schools hired more managers and paid them higher salaries.

Figure 8: The reforms initially increased administrative spending.



Notes: Figure 8 shows administrative spending for New Orleans publicly funded schools and for a matched comparison group from other traditional school districts.

A more recent report shows that these changes in salaries persisted through 2018-2020. While teachers' salaries were on average 8% lower in 2018-2020 compared with pre-Katrina, administrators' salaries were on average 22% higher (inflation-adjusted). The student-teacher ratio was similar in 2018-2020 compared with pre-Katrina, but there were more administrators, aides and counselors per student. We compared these changes to those in neighboring Jefferson Parish and found much larger changes among New Orleans schools over this period.

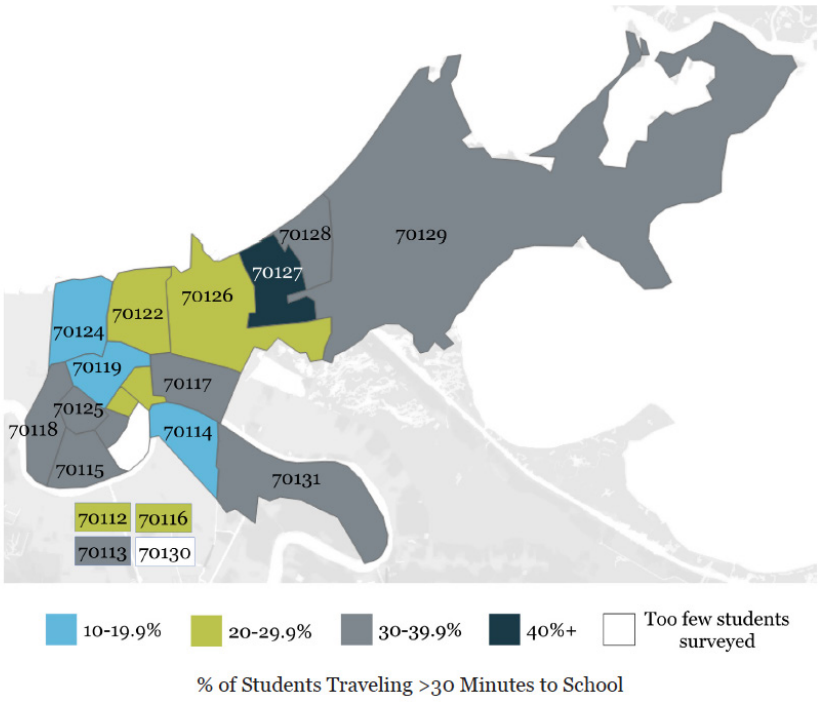
Conclusion #5: Higher Transportation Costs

Transportation costs doubled, and students are traveling farther to get to school.

School choice is intended to allow families to select any school that matches their children's needs. However, choices are limited in practice as preferred schools may be far away and students are not guaranteed admittance to the schools closest to home. This limitation particularly affects low-income families that may have less access to personal transportation. Car access fundamentally shapes families' school requests and placements.

Our research suggests that since Katrina, the average distance to school has increased by at least two miles. Also, from a sample of school bus stops, we find that the average time from each bus stop to school is 35 minutes (each way), and 25% of bus trips take 50 minutes or more to get to school. As shown in Figure 9, students in New Orleans East, the West Bank, and Uptown have longer commutes than the average. Students must leave earlier (usually before 7 a.m.) and get home later. Partly as a result of these longer distances, transportation costs have nearly doubled to upwards of $750 per student per year. Another possible cause of rising transportation costs is decentralization of school management, which makes it difficult for schools and management organizations to leverage economies of scale in busing.

Figure 9: Students in New Orleans East, the West Bank, and Uptown have the longest commute times.



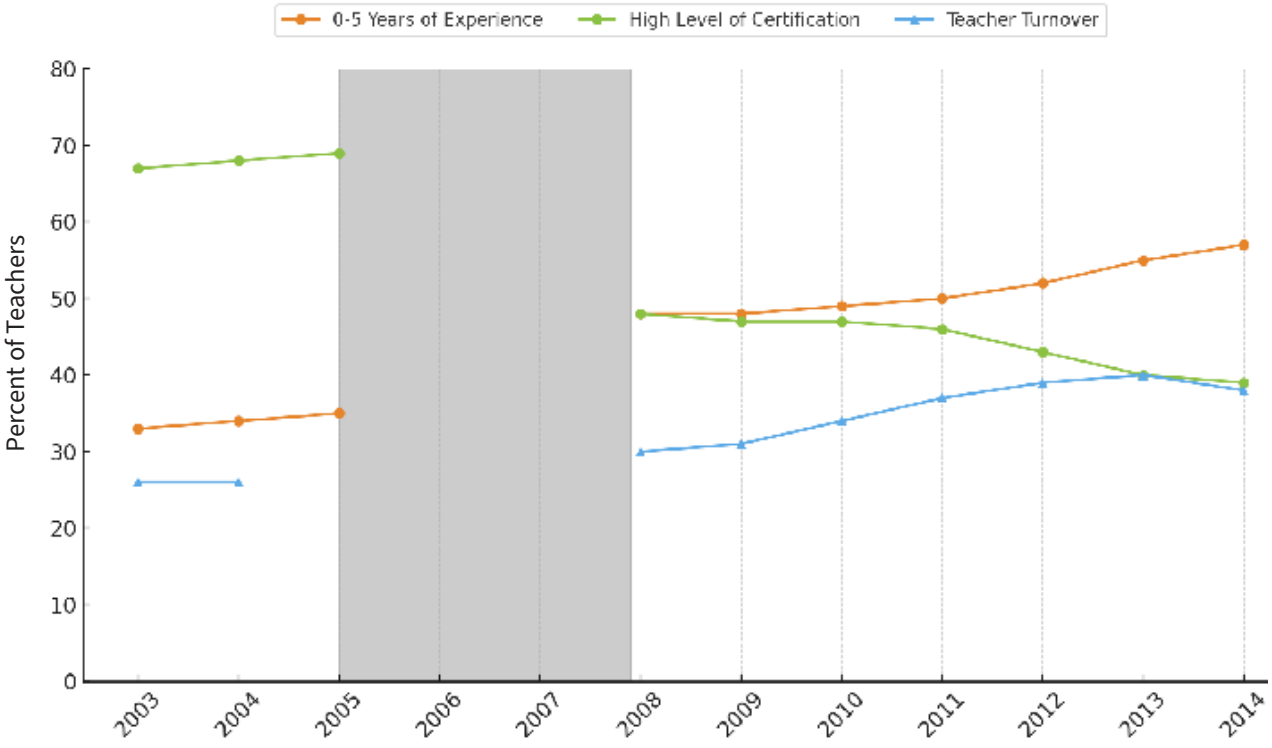
Notes: Figure 9 displays results from our 2018-2019 New Orleans Citywide Youth Survey, indicating the percent of students surveyed in each zip code that reported a greater than 30 minute commute.

Conclusion #6: Changes in Teacher Workforce

The city's reforms significantly changed the teacher workforce and the way teachers viewed their work.

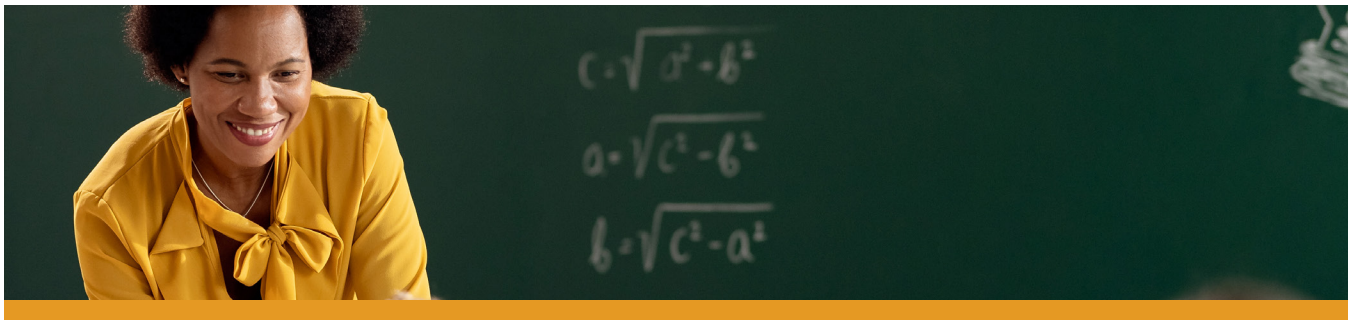
Given that all teachers were fired and that schools gained considerable control over personnel, it is no surprise to see changes among the city's teachers. Many of the changes appear to go against what are considered the hallmarks of school quality. Teacher turnover increased, as did the share of teachers with low levels of experience (Figure 10). Meanwhile, the share of teachers with advanced credentials decreased.

Figure 10: Teacher credentials declined after the reforms while teacher turnover and the share of teachers with low levels of experience increased.



Notes: Figure 10 displays trends within New Orleans without a comparison group. While not shown, there were minimal changes in teacher characteristics in our comparison groups after the reforms. "High level of certification" includes the top two certification levels in Louisiana.

In addition, the share of the teaching workforce that is Black decreased from 71% in 2005 to 49% in 2014 but then rebounded to at least 56% in recent years. These efforts have been hampered by the Trump administration's decision to cancel a federal grant that was funding a citywide partnership to further increase the number of teachers of color. Also, in 2020, we found that school administrators and teachers who are Black on average receive lower compensation than their White counterparts.



These issues in the supply of teachers seem to be caused by several changes brought on by the reforms:

- *Types of preparation programs.* The number of students graduating from local universities with teacher credentials declined sharply. This is largely because charter schools tend to hire teachers from alternative routes, outside of universities. Many newly hired teachers came from teacher preparation and placement programs whose completers are less likely to stay in the profession.

- *Lower job security.* Except in a handful of schools, New Orleans teachers do not take part in collective bargaining. Our survey from 2014 found that teachers themselves believed that low-performing teachers were more likely to be dismissed than before the reforms (Figure 11).

- *Autonomy.* While charter schooling creates autonomy for school leaders, this is not always the case for teachers. Some teachers report having more autonomy, but more report less autonomy (Figure 11).

- *Workload.* Heavy workloads and teacher burnout were cited as major complaints by teachers who attempted unionization campaigns in their charter schools. According to newer teacher survey data from The New Teacher Project (TNTP), the heavy workload is a top reason why teachers leave New Orleans schools; teachers reported working an average of 46 hours per week.

This combination of less preparation, lower job security, less autonomy, and higher workloads—to go along with lower salaries (see Conclusion #4)—would increase turnover in any city and any occupation.

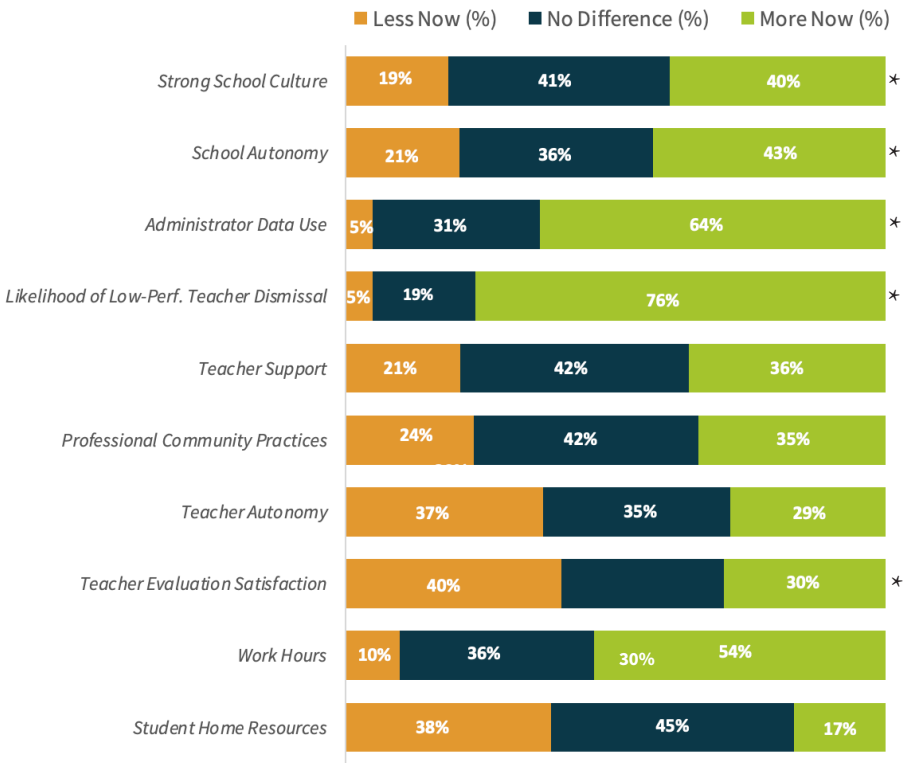
Not all the changes in New Orleans have made teaching less attractive. Some teachers may prefer an environment where their colleagues are held accountable for results. Returning teachers reported improved school culture and support for teachers and that schools are much more data-driven and goal-oriented, especially with respect to academic goals. (Reinforcing our point above, the TNTP survey also indicates that school culture is a key reason why some teachers stay). These improvements might have offset the increase in turnover and contributed to improved student outcomes more generally.

Some turnover is also natural and can be productive. With stronger teacher accountability, more lower-performing teachers exited schools relative to higher-performing teachers. Lower-performing

teachers in New Orleans are 2.5 times more likely to leave their school than high-performing teachers, compared with only 1.9 times in traditional public schools located in neighboring districts.

However, the high overall turnover rate means that high-performing teachers were also more likely to leave New Orleans and the profession. In addition, while some school administrators took evaluations seriously and used them to be more reflective about their teaching, others admitted in interviews to trying to "game the system" through tactics like sending certain students out of the room when observers came by. This likely tempered the potential benefits of accountability.

Figure 11: Teachers' views on how learning and work environments changed after the reforms.



Notes: The responses in Figure 11 are based on a 2014 survey of 323 teachers who taught in New Orleans public schools before Katrina and returned to teach in the city's publicly funded schools after the reforms. "More now" indicates that aspect of the given work environment (e.g., teacher autonomy) was more common after the reforms. An asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference.

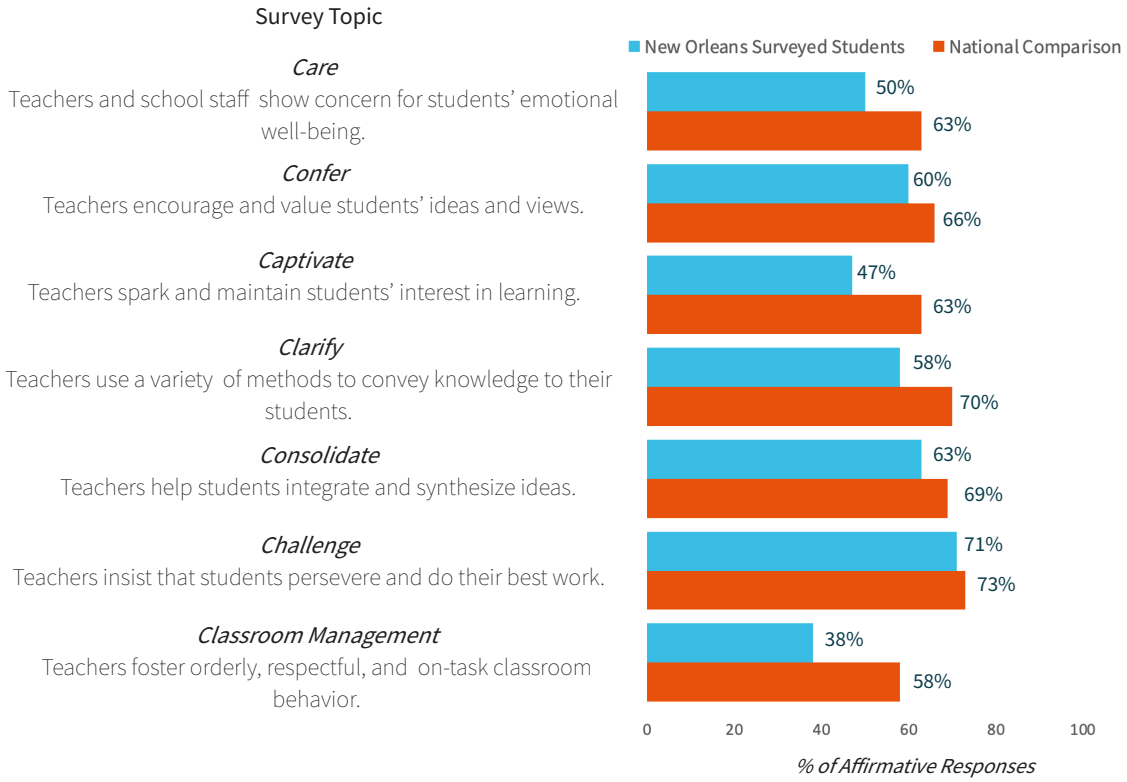
Conclusion #7: Mixed Teaching Quality

Student surveys suggest that the quality of teaching is somewhat below the national urban district average, especially in classroom management and caring.

Our 2018-19 survey of New Orleans students reported lower teaching quality than students in similar schools nationally. In particular, 63% of students nationally reported that their teachers care about them, compared with only 50% of New Orleans students (Figure 12).

We asked students to report on these same measures three years later and found some improvements in student perceptions of their teachers' classroom management, encouragement of ideas and views, and ability to help students clarify and consolidate information (Figure 13). However, there were no improvements in reports of teacher caring. There is some evidence that nationally, districts experienced similar improvements, suggesting that New Orleans students still rate their teachers worse compared to students across the country.

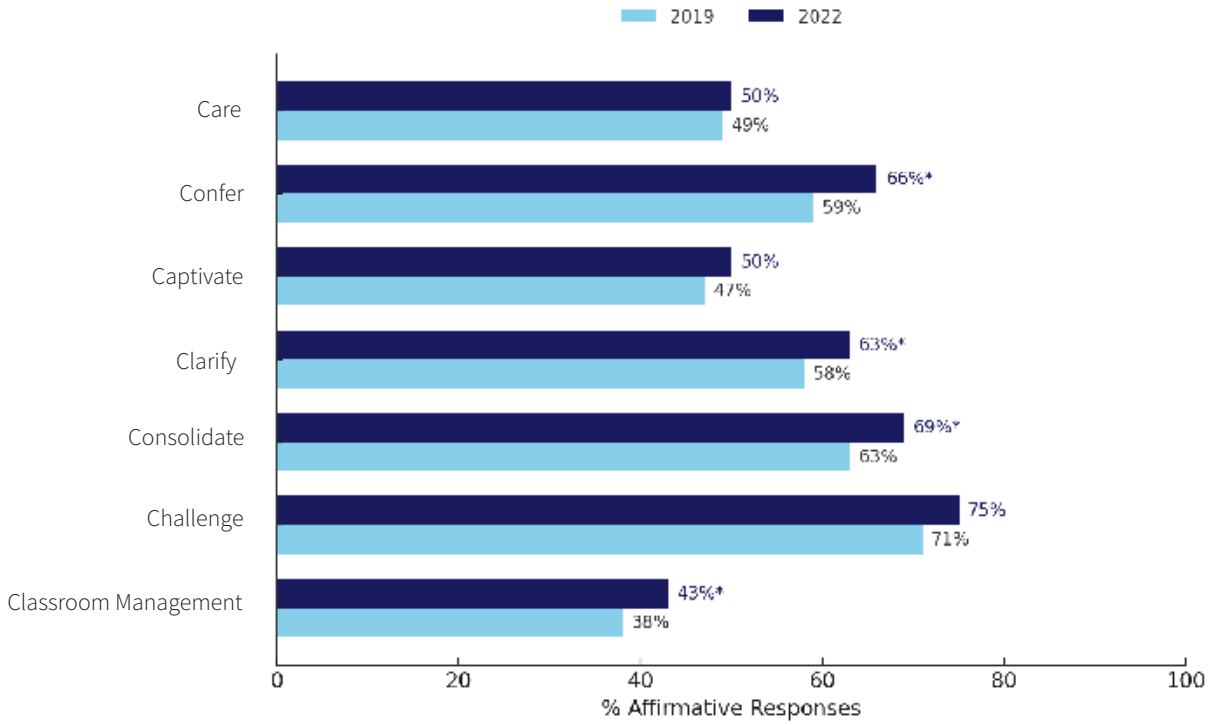
Figure 12: New Orleans students rated their teachers lower than students in a national comparison group did on every dimension of teacher quality in 2018-19.



Notes: Figure 12 presents the percent of 6th through 11th grade students who responded affirmatively to survey items across seven dimensions of teaching that are predictive of student outcomes. We compare student responses in the New Orleans survey to those from a national sample of schools with similar racial composition.

We do not have similar measures of student perceptions of teaching quality from before the reforms. However, we do view these results as evidence that New Orleans teachers could be doing a better job of supporting students in the classroom. The analyses of our next youth survey in 2024-2025 will address whether these national and local trends persist at the 20th anniversary of Katrina.

Figure 13: On average, New Orleans students report higher teacher quality in 2022 than in 2019, consistent with national trends.



Notes: Figure 13 presents the percent of 6th through 11th grade students who responded affirmatively to survey items across seven dimensions of teaching that are highly predictive of student outcomes. We compare student responses in the New Orleans 2018-19 survey to those from the 2021-22 survey . An asterisk indicates the difference between responses in 2019 and 2022 is significant (p<.05).

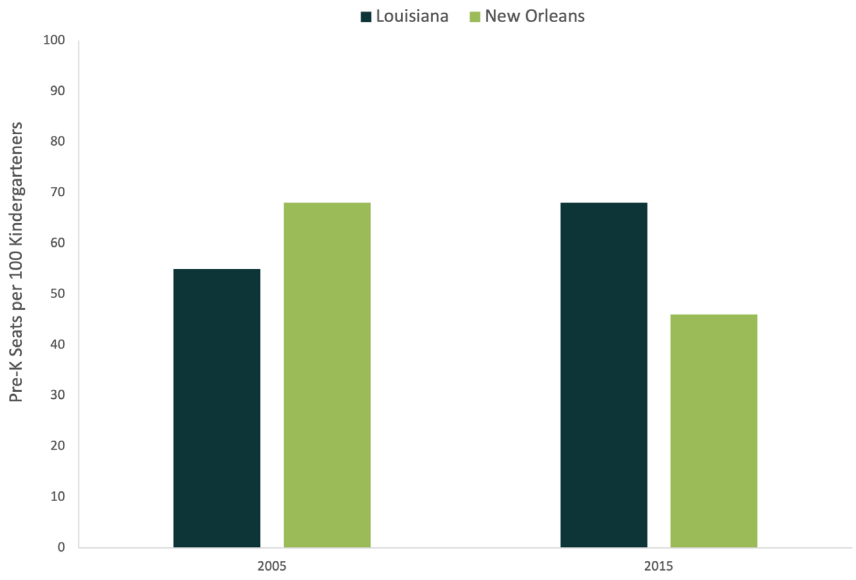
Conclusion #8: Unintended Effects in Early Childhood Education & the Arts

The reforms had some other consequences, including a reduced focus on the arts and decreased access to early childhood education.

Earlier, we discussed some consequences for teacher supply, school spending, and more. Below, we discuss additional negative consequences not yet introduced. The introduction of charter schools reduced the availability of early childhood program offerings after the reforms. Before Katrina, most elementary schools in Orleans Parish offered pre-K. Charter operators were not required to keep these pre-K programs and state funding does not cover the full cost of educating pre-K students. The accountability system focuses on performance in grades 3 through 8, so charter school leaders do not have incentive to offer pre-K programs. Since early childhood programs became a part of the centralized enrollment system in New Orleans, there have been improvements in the support and information parents have access to, which has increased overall enrollment in these programs. However, New Orleans still lags behind the rest of the state in pre-K availability.

We also find that schools in New Orleans focused less on the arts during the first decade of the reforms. Fewer K-8 students in New Orleans enrolled in arts enrichment courses than in similar districts across the state. In 2018, arts educators reported feeling ignored and under-resourced compared to educators in tested subjects.

Figure 14: Pre-K seats in New Orleans' schools decreased between 2005 and 2015.



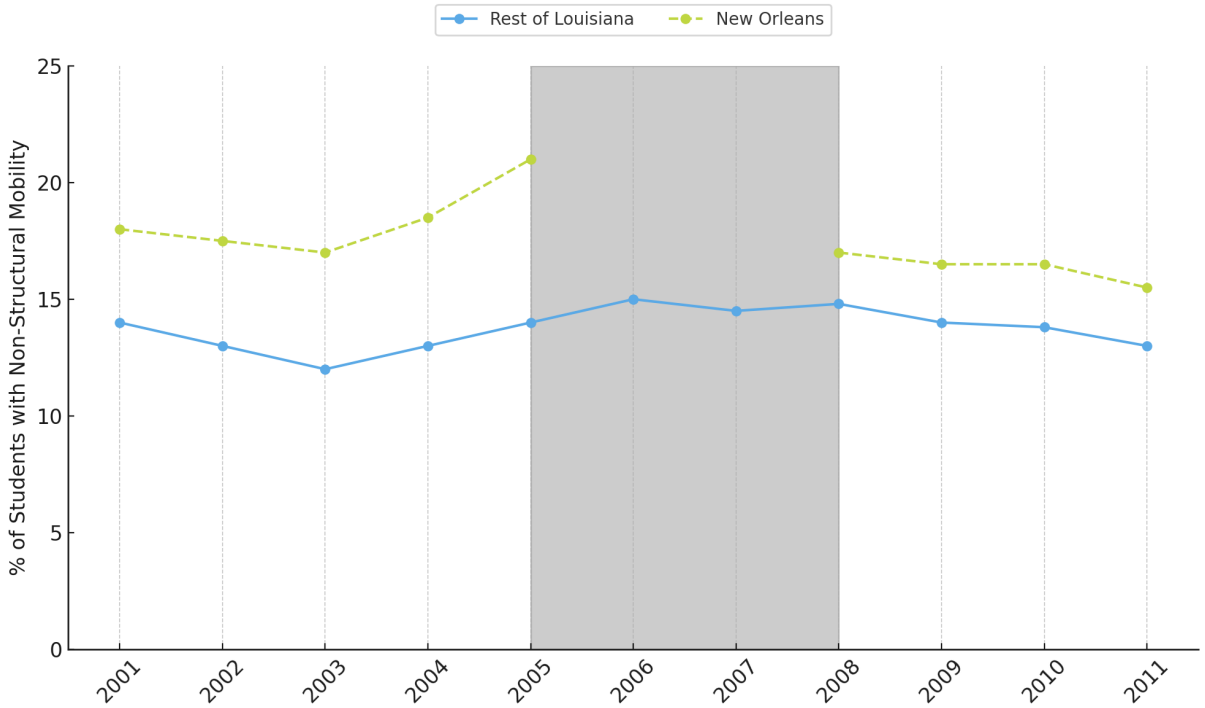
Notes: This figure compares publicly funded pre-K seats per 100 kindergartners in New Orleans and statewide in Louisiana in 2005 and 2015.

Conclusion #9: No Clear Evidence of Broader Negative Effects

We do not find evidence of other potential consequences for student mobility, diversity in programs, and crime rates.

Other feared negative consequences of the school reforms did not emerge. One concern has been that school choice would increase student mobility as families shopped around for the best schools, creating disruption for students and for their classmates. However, student mobility dropped (Figure 15).

Figure 15: The post-Katrina school reforms reduced student mobility.

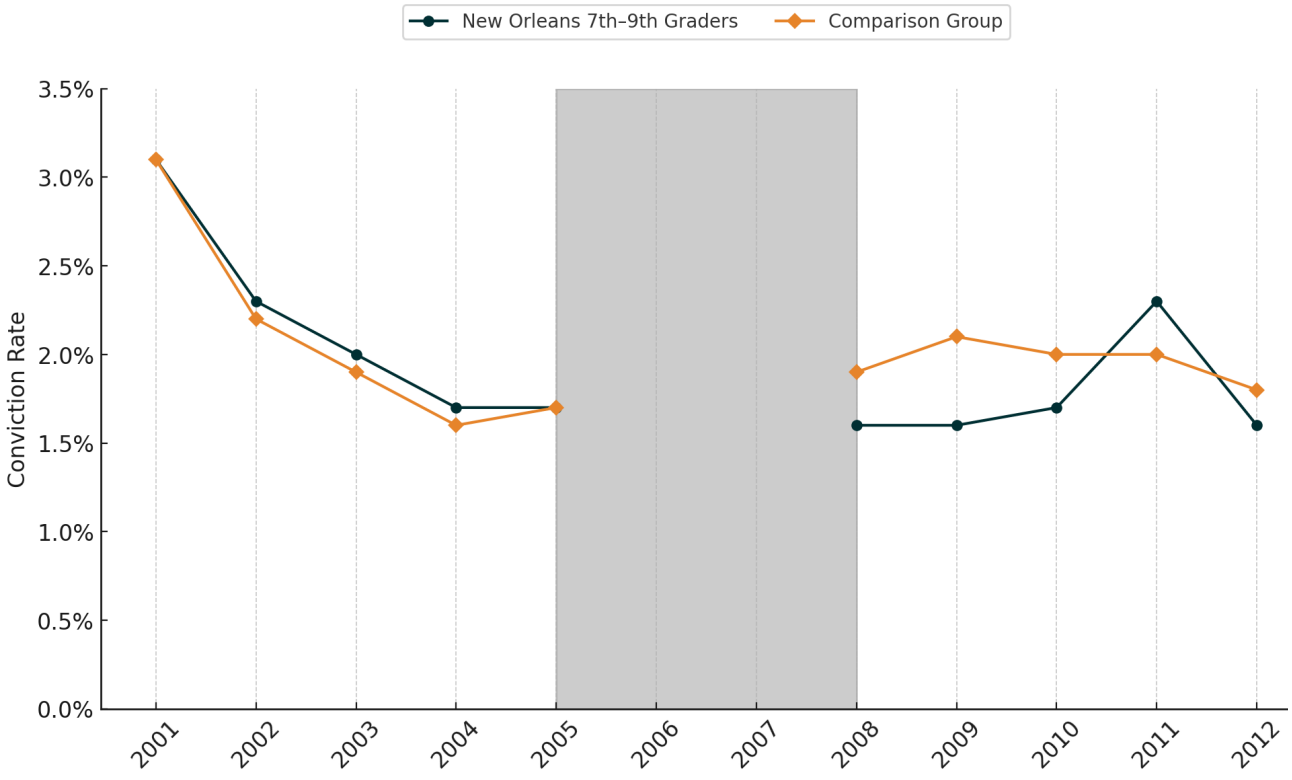


Notes: Figure 15 shows the annual rates of student mobility in New Orleans and a matched sample of school districts before and after the reforms. The figure shows that level of mobility and the gap with other districts both dropped in New Orleans after the reforms. We define mobility here to exclude "structural moves" where students reach the last grade and move on to middle or high schools.

Another potential concern, especially with the aggressive closure and takeover of schools based almost entirely on raising student test scores, is that schools might all look alike. However, New Orleans schools have maintained or increased diverse program offerings.

Finally, with an increase in exclusionary discipline practices in the early years of the reforms, there was a fear that more New Orleans youth would enter the school-to-prison pipeline. Our evidence does not support this. Rather, we find some evidence that the reforms reduced conviction rates among New Orleans youth, compared with similar students across Louisiana (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Convictions were lower in almost every year for New Orleans 7th-9th graders.



Notes: Figure 16 shows the annual conviction rate for 7th to 9th graders in New Orleans compared to students in districts across Louisiana with similar characteristics. We focus on this age group to capture the effects of the reforms for students while they are still in school, excluding grades with higher dropout rates (10th to 12th grades). The figure shows that youth crime was similar between New Orleans youth and the control group before Katrina, but is lower in all but one year (2011).

Conclusion #10: Voucher Program Problems

The state's school voucher program, the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), a related type of school reform, had negative impacts on participating students' math and English scores, and no effects on college-going.

While our work is primarily focused on New Orleans charter schools, school vouchers are another form of choice-based reforms. With vouchers, families can use public funds to send their children to private schools (including religious schools). Our findings about LSP vouchers are as follows:

- The LSP showed negative effects on student outcomes after four years. The program seemed to get off to a very rough start with very large negative effects, before rebounding somewhat, then dipping again. The reasons for the initial "dip and return," and the absence of positive effects three years later, have been a subject of active debate.
- A more recent study suggests that the voucher program did not improve college outcomes either.
- Our other voucher studies suggest that vouchers had reduced racial segregation and decreased the percentage of students who were identified for special education.

The question is, why have the results been so poor? Four main explanations have been proposed. First, it may be that private schools are not as good as some think and that their often positive outcomes are driven by the demographics of those who can usually afford them. Second, the negative test score effects might be poor measures of achievement if the private school curricula is not aligned to state tests. Third, it is possible that non-participating schools are higher-performing and that they did not participate because of program rules (e.g., not using their usual admission rules). We did not find that LSP voucher schools differed on the direct measure of quality. Fourth, higher-performing private schools might not participate regardless of program rules because they want to maintain their exclusivity and status. Which of these explanations is more important is still unclear.

This voucher evidence takes on renewed importance with the recent passage of the Louisiana GATOR Scholarship in 2024, which greatly expands the population of eligible students. While the financing and other elements of this program are uncertain, this new voucher program could draw large numbers of students out of New Orleans' charter schools, which have demonstrated academic success (Conclusion #1), and into private schools, where the academic effects have been negative.

Conclusion #11: Reform Results May Not Apply to Other Cities

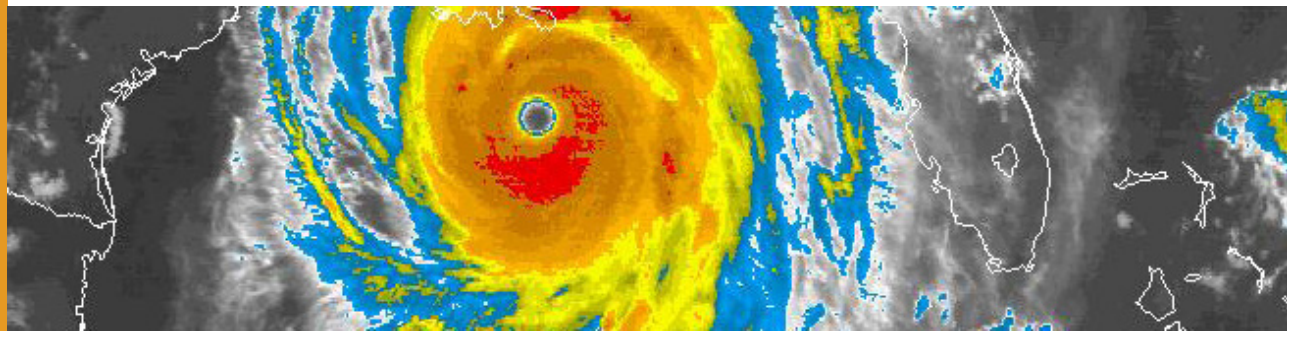
New Orleans faced a unique set of circumstances after Hurricane Katrina. Whether other cities can expect similar academic benefits from New Orleans-style reforms is uncertain.

The post-Katrina reforms generated impressive results in terms of outcomes like test scores, high school graduation rates, and college entry rates (Conclusion #1). However, that does not mean that other cities will get the same results simply by copying the New Orleans model. New Orleans is distinctive in ways that made these reforms especially effective here:

- *More Money.* While more money by itself would very likely not have produced the effects reported above, the additional funding likely did amplify the reform effects. States and cities seeking to save money or increase student achievement without additional resources may be disappointed.

- *Ample Educator Workforce.* In the early reform years, the supply of educators expanded in New Orleans in ways that other cities will generally not be able to replicate. It was an attractive city for young people even before the reforms. Many apparently also wanted to come to New Orleans to help rebuild the city, while others, especially school leaders, may have come because the city became a national hub of school reform. (At the same time, that allure seems to have worn off. The outcomes of the reforms have been sustained despite returning to a more typical urban district teacher supply).

- *Low Starting Point.* New Orleans was one of the lowest-performing school districts in Louisiana, and the country, in the pre-Katrina period. A low starting point gave the city more potential to improve.



Conclusion #12: Continued Progress May Depend on Trust and Roles

NOLA-PS is already above-average on academic outcomes compared with other urban school districts. To reach a higher bar, local leaders will have to address remaining distrust among key stakeholders and disagreement about the roles of the district and other key actors.

State control of New Orleans schools ended in 2018, but the local district did not regain many of the powers that it held pre-Katrina, including school staffing, curriculum, and instruction. Rather, the reunification largely meant reinforcing the governance and management that had been in place under the state takeover, but shifting their practices to the local level. New Orleans created an entirely new type of local school district.

Strained relationships and confusion about roles among the district, school leaders, and the community remain. This is rooted in two main factors: first, the fact that the reforms were initiated by state takeover in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina without broad public input; and, second, the new and different role played by the elected school board. The community expects action when complaints are made, but the district has limited scope for action in schools because it no longer manages their day-to-day operations. Likewise, many schools want the district to provide more support—not just accountability—but this is arguably outside of the district's capabilities. These issues will need to be addressed to support continued improvements in the school district.

Two additional issues have created further strains. First, this school year the district opened its first direct-run school (The Leah Chase School), and the school board directed the superintendent to draw up a plan to run more schools directly.

Second, the district recently discovered miscalculations in school funding, creating a loss of nearly $600 per student for schools. This, along with turnover in the superintendent position, may lead to further distrust in the district's capacity to run the school system effectively.

Although student outcomes remained stable during and immediately after reunification (see Conclusion #1), there were some declines in student test scores and graduation rates associated with COVID-19. New Orleans faced greater health risks than many areas in the country and students spent more time learning remotely. The most recent test scores suggest that the city schools have made up the COVID-19 declines in most outcomes.

In conclusion, the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina was a profound tragedy, one that continues to shape the future of New Orleans. We have a collective responsibility to understand the impact of the sweeping educational reforms put in place in the wake of such destruction. On one hand, these reforms have led to significant improvements in student outcomes that have been sustained. However, as our analysis reveals, there are important trade-offs in terms of equity in the student experience (Conclusion #2), the teaching workforce (Conclusion #6), and the arts (Conclusion #8) that must be considered. While progress has been made, it is crucial to carefully assess both the successes and challenges in order to continue advancing educational opportunities for all students in the city.

Acknowledgements

This report is the culmination of more than a decade of work. The number of people we owe thanks is too large to count, but we nevertheless try.

First, we thank the Tulane University leadership for giving us the chance to do this work. ERA-New Orleans was started, and is still housed within, Tulane. Former Tulane President Scott Cowen was instrumental in getting this work off the ground and that support has continued with President Mike Fitts.

Second, we thank our funders, including Tulane and the Murphy Institute, but also the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Spencer Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, and Booth Bricker Foundation.

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About The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is a research center that collaborates with local education stakeholders to produce objective, rigorous, and useful research to inform the community's understanding of how to improve students' experiences in schools and beyond.


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Errata

In the original version of this report, on page 29, we had written, "The LSP showed negative effects on student outcomes after three years." This should have said "four years" and we changed the text accordingly.

On the same page, in the original version, we had written, "Our other voucher studies suggest that vouchers had no effect on racial segregation." After some discussion with the authors of the report about statistical significance, we determined that this should have said, "Our other voucher studies suggest that vouchers reduced racial segregation." Again, we changed the text accordingly.

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