

Louisiana Educator

An analysis of the latest happenings in the area of Elementary/Secondary education with emphasis on state level policies as they affect teachers and school administrators. Send any comments or suggestions to louisianaeducator@gmail.com. By: Michael Deshotels

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State School Takeovers: Do They Work?

Formation of the Recovery District

In 2003 the Louisiana legislature passed a law allowing the State Department of Education to take over any public school deemed by State Board policy to be a *Failing School* based primarily on student test scores. If a school was declared to be failing for three or more years in a row, the BESE could authorize the LA Dept. of Education to take over the school and design a turnaround plan for the school to bring it back to satisfactory performance. Schools taken over as described would become part of the Louisiana Recovery School District (RSD).

The New Orleans RSD

Following the destruction of schools caused by Hurricane Katrina, the Legislature passed a new law (Act 35) that allowed the RSD to take over not only failing schools in New Orleans, but any school performing below the state average. 25 of the schools taken over by the state following Katrina were technically not failing. But all the schools taken over as a group were performing near the bottom compared to other schools in the state.

Over a period of several years, all the schools in the N.O. RSD were converted into charter schools governed by self appointed boards. These charter schools were expected to utilize innovative strategies to bring student performance to the levels required by the state. Their charters could be revoked if they failed in this effort or did not comply with state policy or violated state or federal laws.

The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) kept about 30% of the schools

The schools retained under the control of OPSB were mostly selective admissions schools that catered to students who generally performed at higher than average levels.

The OPSB also decided to charter most of its schools to local community groups. These schools are not part of the takeover or reformed group. They are managed by an elected school board just as before Katrina.

Charter Advocates Have Claimed Dramatic Improvement of RSD Schools

Charter School advocates have claimed major success in improving student performance and have lobbied effectively to maintain control of the charter schools in the RSD. This issue of the Louisiana Educator compares claims of success of RSD schools with actual data collected by the LDOE and other agencies.

Charter Advocates Include Data on Both the RSD and the OPSB schools when measuring performance

Almost from the beginning, charter advocates in promoting the new takeover schools included performance statistics combining performance of RSD schools and OPSB schools. Such combination of data has obscured the actual performance of the “reformed” or reorganized schools.

OPSB School Performance Has Been the Major Factor in Improving Overall Performance

OPSB schools enroll only 30% of the total public school students in New Orleans with the RSD enrolling all other public school students.

Test performance of OPSB students on average far surpasses test performance of RSD students. For example, on the most recent state tests the OPSB students accounted for 60% of the students in New Orleans classified as high performers even though the OPSB enrollment is small compared to the RSD. As a result, the combined statistics indicate much improvement in the performance of the New Orleans students over pre-Katrina performance.

What is the Stand Alone Performance of the Reformed Schools in New Orleans?

The important question that should be answered is “Does school takeover by the RSD and conversion to charter schools produce a real turnaround in performance?” Here are the performance statistics for the RSD schools:

- *83% of the other public school systems in the state still produce better test results than the RSD*
- *94% of the other public systems produce better ACT results than the RSD*
- *The RSD is very near the bottom among the 70 LA systems in percentage of students graduating*

- *The RSD has the highest percentage of students leaving school before 9th grade*
- *Even though most RSD schools are advertised as college prep, only 5.5% of RSD students taking Advanced Placement courses passed the credit exams*
- *Most Louisiana public schools including the RSD have improved state scores in the 10 years since Katrina, but the comparative ranking with other states has declined*
- *Louisiana has produced significant test grade inflation by lowering raw cut scores on state tests. Real achievement is only slightly improved as measured by the NAEP test*

When RSD performance data is separated from the performance of the Orleans Parish School Board schools, the RSD performance drops to near the bottom of all Louisiana public school systems in every category measured.

