

City Yearns for Rebirth Among Ruin

New Orleans sets sights higher as schools open.

By [Lesli A. Maxwell](#)

Over the next few weeks, dozens of schools will open across New Orleans for the second full academic year since Hurricane Katrina. As many as 33,000 children are expected to report to one of the campuses in the city's patchwork of charter and traditional public schools.

Unlike last fall—when many schools opened without textbooks, functioning cafeterias, and enough teachers—people in the city express growing confidence that the new leadership for New Orleans' schools will provide such basics this time around.

“I think we might finally see things move beyond just being able to serve hot lunches and provide clean bathrooms,” said Karran Harper Royal, a New Orleans parent and education advocate for more than 10 years. “What I think is going to be the real test for the schools this year is whether some real academic reform can start to take root.”

But daunting obstacles remain along the road to recovery and hoped-for reform. Over the coming school year, *Education Week* will chronicle the efforts to rebuild New Orleans' crippled schools—a vital test of whether the city itself can revive and thrive again—and one of the nation's most important education stories.

Since the hurricane struck two years ago this month, New Orleans has become a laboratory for innovation. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, nearly 60 percent of the city's 26,000 schoolchildren were attending 31 charter schools, the largest share in any city in the nation. Nine new charters, in fact, are slated to open in the new school year.

Since Hurricane Katrina, the governance of the public schools in New Orleans has become fragmented and decentralized. The state-run Recovery School District directly operated 22 schools as of last spring and the local school board only five.

Still, the state-run [Recovery School District](#), or RSD, is expected to operate more than 30 schools this year and will remain central to rebuilding public education in the city.

“We finally have a leadership team that's experienced and thoughtful and understands what transformation is about,” said Scott S. Cowen, the president of Tulane University. “I

think we are moving out of crisis mode and evolving into a more predictable and manageable phase of school development.”

Only 27 percent of parents responding to surveys said they believed public schools in New Orleans were better than before Hurricane Katrina, according to a [June report produced by a collaborative of local education and civic groups](#). But 63 percent said they believed that public schools in the city would be better in the future.

Turning that hope into reality will require triumphing over extraordinary circumstances.

Most of the school buildings are in ruins. Students are still traumatized. Many lagged academically, and fell further behind during their exile after the storm. Parents are finding most neighborhood schools either shuttered or reincarnated as charters. It’s hard to figure out who is in charge of which schools.

And the perception among many New Orleanians who are poor and African-American is that selective-admissions schools and the new charters are reserved for more-advantaged children.

Building Blocks in Place

Educators in the city, as they did last school year, are scrambling to repair enough buildings by Sept. 4, opening day in the Recovery School District.

This time around, though, New Orleans’ schools have new leaders: Paul G. Vallas, a veteran urban superintendent, and Paul G. Pastorek, a New Orleans lawyer chosen in March to be Louisiana’s state superintendent of education.

With so many buildings beyond repair, contractors are working to erect temporary, modular campuses to accommodate students. Mr. Pastorek enlisted Louisiana National Guard engineers to manage the building projects. He also hammered out an agreement with the Federal Emergency Management Agency allowing FEMA money to pay for renovating or constructing five schools—projects that should be under way by December.

“This is so important, symbolically and otherwise,” Mr. Pastorek said, “because our buildings have been an impediment to learning and to the community’s perception.”

An aggressive recruitment campaign by the RSD and its nonprofit partners has set a goal of luring 600 teachers this fall with signing bonuses and moving expenses. New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit group that prepares principals, has begun training its first group of seven leaders. It has promised to groom 40 principals over three years.

Since taking over in July, Mr. Vallas has assembled his core team, creating new positions and hiring for other key posts that were not filled by Robin G. Jarvis, his predecessor as chief of the state-operated district. With more than 160 staff members in place, many of

Mr. Vallas' hires will focus on academic reforms and instructional improvement. Few, if any, such initiatives got off the ground last year.

Mr. Vallas has promised to address dismal test scores by lengthening the school day for six months. Instead of a voluntary summer school program, he will require an extended year for students who fail the state exam, have poor grades, or rack up absences.

"It's going to constitute about half the student body," he said recently. "These are kids who need much more instruction."

The RSD also will operate a "welcome school," where incoming students' academic and emotional needs will be assessed before they are placed at a campus. The idea has drawn criticism from some community members, who fear it will be a "warehouse school" for the most challenging students.

Mr. Vallas, who partnered with churches and community organizations in his previous job as schools chief in Philadelphia, plans to do the same in New Orleans. The recovery district will pay the groups for services such as truancy prevention, hallway monitoring, and alternatives to suspension. Last year, RSD schools had many security guards, but offered scant social services.

Outlook Remains Murky

Beyond such immediate measures, the long-term strategy for education in New Orleans is still evolving. Critical questions, including who or what will ultimately govern public education, remain unresolved.

"People are still confused about what is what, and then once they do find out the difference between a charter school, an RSD school, and an Orleans Parish school, they don't feel like the better options are actually available to them," Ms. Harper Royal said. "We've got all this chaos about these different schools and different systems so that middle-class people like me get better choices."

When Hurricane Katrina shuttered the [Orleans Parish district](#), the Louisiana legislature moved rapidly to transfer authority to the Recovery School District, which had been set up right before the storm to take control of five of the city's worst schools.

That law, known as Act 35, expanded the role of the RSD and called for it to manage the city's academically failing schools: 112 out of 128. That left the original, pre-Katrina district and school board in charge of five schools (all of them high-performing, selective-admissions campuses), and responsible for overseeing 12 charter schools. Under Act 35, the RSD will dissolve after five years and return the schools to local control—a change likely to be fraught with uncertainty and political conflict.

State leaders envisioned that the RSD would become a lean, central administrative arm for a system of independent charter schools. That vision dimmed quickly, however, when

too few high-quality charter operators came forward in time for the 2006-07 school year, according to the collaborative report by the Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University, the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, and the New Orleans City Council education committee.

The recovery district and its tiny staff were faced with running an entire school district. Legally obligated to take all students, the RSD schools quickly became home to the neediest and lowest-achieving students. Many in the city described those schools as a “dumping ground” and a “last resort,” according to the report. ("[Rookie Teachers, Stressed Students Confront Realities of New Orleans' Schools After Storm.](#)" March 14, 2007.)

On the other hand, some of the charter operators and education entrepreneurs who have come to New Orleans have promised big.

With innovative ideas—and both federal charter school dollars and private philanthropy to help pay for them—national groups like New Leaders for New Schools and the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, charter school organization talk of transforming the city into a premier venue for school choice for families who are mostly poor and black.

So far, though, robust school choice has been limited. Many charters use subtle forms of selection such as applications and parental-involvement rules, the report said. Most have enrollment caps that kept them from taking most of the thousands of children who returned to New Orleans throughout the past school year. Those students could go to the RSD, but capacity problems resulted in a 300-student waiting list in January; it lasted three weeks, until public outrage and threats of lawsuits forced officials to open more schools.

“I think one of the toughest things for parents to adapt to is that there are no longer neighborhood schools, or, if there is a school in their neighborhood, it’s a charter that may not be able to enroll their child,” said Mr. Pastorek, the Louisiana state superintendent. He and Mr. Vallas have pledged to address inequities, real and perceived.

One idea is to create “catchment” areas that would give some preference to students who want to attend charters in their neighborhoods. Another approach, Mr. Pastorek said, is to set up a single registration process for any public school, in time for the 2008-09 school year.

Brian Riedlinger, the president of the [Algiers Charter School Association](#), a local charter operator with nine schools on New Orleans’ West Bank, supports catchment areas, but said that until “all of our schools get better, some people are going to feel shortchanged.”

Some parents and educators who worked in the pre-Katrina school system chafe at the arrival of outside groups, sentiment that in part stems from the mass teacher firings after the hurricane.

“The biggest issue in our community is that we want what is best for our kids, and that is good schools,” said Danatus N. King, the president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. “But there is a feeling that some of these groups who are coming in have an arrogance, that they can fix what we locals couldn’t fix ourselves.”

Mr. Riedlinger understands that view and has hired as many New Orleanians as possible. Still, he said, the scale of problems requires the best minds and ideas, regardless of where they come from.

The Ford Foundation is underwriting a yearlong Education Week special project chronicling efforts to rebuild and reform the New Orleans schools.

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