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After the Deluge, A New Education System

Today close to 70% of New Orleans children attend charter schools.

By **LESLIE JACOBS**

New Orleans

Five years ago yesterday, the levees broke. Hurricane Katrina flooded roughly 80% of this city, causing nearly \$100 billion in damage. The storm forced us to rebuild our homes, workplaces and many of our institutions—including our failing public education system.

But from the flood waters, the most market-driven public school system in the country has emerged. Education reformers across America should take notice: The model is working.

Citywide, the number of fourth-grade students who pass the state's standardized tests has jumped by almost a third—to 65% in 2010 from 49% in 2007. The passage rate among eighth-graders during the same period has improved at a similar clip, to 58% from 44%.

In high school, the transformation has been even more impressive. Since 2007, the percentage of students meeting the state's proficiency goals is up 44% for English and 45% for math. Schools have achieved this dramatic improvement despite serving a higher percentage of low-income students—84%—than they did before the storm. Many of these students missed months or even a whole year of school.



Associated Press

New Orleans Recovery School District

How did New Orleans do it? After Katrina, the state took over all but 16 of the city's public schools and placed them in the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD had been established in 2003 to allow the state to take failing schools away from local school districts and give them a new start. But rather than mimic a more conventional, centralized school district, state officials took the bold step of creating a market-driven system of autonomous schools. This arrangement is unlike anything else in the country.

Public officials dramatically expanded the number of charter schools in the city. Today close to 70% of children attend charters. These independent public schools formulate their own budgets,

control their own academic affairs, and make their own hiring decisions.

Schools now have the freedom to select teachers whose skills and philosophy match their mission, and vice versa. Students and their families have choices, too. No student is assigned to a school according to a neighborhood boundary, and any parent unhappy with his or her child's school can choose a different one.

State officials have put charters in a position to succeed or fail on their own merits. They've also allocated resources fairly. Charters occupy public school buildings, like regular public schools, and they receive equitable funding for each student they enroll.

This decentralized system has encouraged educational entrepreneurship. Just as businesses may use different methods to deliver their products or services, so do New Orleans's charter schools. Some of the most successful charters are run by veteran principals who prefer veteran teachers from traditional education programs. Other successful charter schools, like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), are new to the city and rely on alternatives like Teach for America.

New Orleans is also pioneering cooperative competition, or "co-opetition," between schools. While they may compete for students, teachers and bragging rights, schools are working together to solve problems. For example, the founder of a particularly successful charter school came up with a highly effective literacy program for ninth graders. He willingly shared it with other high school "competitors."

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Louisiana has been smart about how it approves charter applicants and holds them accountable. In New Orleans, potential charter operators must submit to a rigorous screening process. Six of 44 applicants were approved in the first year after Katrina, and charters are required to meet

specific performance standards to keep their authorization.

City residents have embraced these changes. A 2009 poll by Citizens for a Better Louisiana asked, "What about New Orleans has gotten better since the hurricane?" The overwhelming answer—offered without prompting by one in four respondents—was "education." A separate poll from Tulane University's Cowen Institute found that two-thirds agreed with the state's decision to take over schools. Nearly 80% thought parents should be able to send their children to any school in the city.

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. But the disaster gave state officials the opportunity to accelerate education reform. Other cities shouldn't wait for their own cataclysm to do the same.

Ms. Jacobs is a former member of the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the founder of Educate Now!

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