

First all-charter system set to debut in New Orleans

By: Garry Boulard, Contributing Writer August 1, 2014 0

Just weeks before the Recovery School District in New Orleans becomes the nation's first all-charter system, Superintendent Patrick Dobard is guardedly optimistic.

"We're proud of our progress so far," he said. "But we are still just about a third of the way through in terms of what we want to do as an entire system of schools.

"We want to be able to model what an urban school district can look like in the nation. And, to that end, we're just beginning to establish firm ground from an academic point of view."

The announcement that the all-charter district will become a reality this fall preceded the Louisiana Supreme Court's decision in March not to hear an Orleans Parish School Board appeal to reclaim RSD schools that are no longer failing.

That decision was regarded as a significant victory for the RSD, which was created before Hurricane Katrina by the state Legislature but came into its own when additional legislation moved more than 100 of New Orleans' chronically under-performing schools to RSD control.

Since then, even though the city's student enrollment remains some 22,000 off from the more than 65,000 students who attended school before Katrina, RSD test scores and graduation rates have consistently improved.

"We've gone from very poor, unsatisfactory to satisfactory. Now we have to go from good to great, and that means that we still have a lot more work to do," said Jay Altman, the CEO of FirstLine Schools, which operates five campuses — four elementary schools and one high school — within the RSD.

Often that work is done in a constantly changing atmosphere. For example, an earlier FirstLine plan to open a new school dedicated to career and technical education evolved into a program that will be offered at Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School in the Treme.

"From an organizational point of view, it just made it easier to do it that way," Altman said.

FirstLine administrators also found themselves responding last November to a silent sit-in student protest at Clark that focused partly on discipline policies at the school, which in 2012-13 had one of the highest number of total student expulsions in the RSD.

"The protest was actually done respectfully, which I think is a sign of how far the school has come," Altman said.

In response, Clark administrators agreed to better communicate with students on all rules and regulations, an outreach that resonated positively with most students.

"There is obviously a need for school discipline, to create a calm, orderly environment where learning can happen," Altman said. "But it's also important keep open the lines of communication."

KIPP New Orleans continues to grow its charter school network. It opens its 10th school, KIPP East Community Primary, with 100 kindergarteners in eastern New Orleans. The network expects to grow 10 percent in the 2014-15 school year, enrolling about 4,300 students, said Jonathan Bertsch, KIPP New Orleans director of advocacy.

Almost 80 percent of KIPP New Orleans fourth graders passed the LEAP test in the 2013-14 school year, while 80 percent in the eighth grade passed it.

KIPP saw its first graduating class earlier this year at Renaissance High School, where many of the seniors started with the network when it moved into New Orleans in 2006.



Students at the McDonogh 15 Legacy Jazz Orchestra performs its annual spring concert at the school on St. Philip Street in the French Quarter. (Photo by Natalie Chandler)

"A lot of what we do is by taking an individualized approach and building relationships with students and teachers," Bertsch said.

At KIPP Central City Academy, sixth graders use Chromebook laptops to work on compositions that allow quick feedback from teachers, he said.

"It's something we're planning to roll out to that entire school and eventually a larger environment," he said. "I think it really pushed that grade level forward, and we saw improvement in academic achievement."

Managing Editor Natalie Chandler contributed to this report.

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