

Perceptions of Charter and Traditional Schools in New Orleans

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Among other disruptions that Hurricane Katrina brought to New Orleans in 2005 was an upheaval of the city’s public schools. The system, which had already been struggling with poor student performance and financial mismanagement, suffered approximately \$800 million in property damage, and 64,000 students were displaced. In the storm’s wake, New Orleans drastically reformed its public education system, replacing the existing local district with a decentralized, choice-based system of charter and district-run schools. The new system consists of two main school districts, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), and the locally administered Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), each of which authorizes a large number of charter schools and directly operates its own “traditional” (noncharter) schools.

Because New Orleans is the first U.S. city to carry out charter-based reform at such a scale, its experiences have widespread implications. These include the unusual opportunity to examine the operational, instructional, human-capital, and family-outreach policies and practices of charter and traditional schools within a fully choice-based system. To better understand the implications of the reforms, the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University asked RAND to partner with it in using a U.S. Department of Education grant to examine differences in policies and practices between charter and traditional schools in New Orleans.

During the 2008–2009 academic year, RAND and Cowen Institute researchers surveyed New Orleans principals, teachers, and parents about their schools’ governance and operations, educational contexts, educator qualifications, and parental choice and involvement. Because the surveys were administered at a single point in time and respondents represented only a subset of targeted schools, the findings have limited generalizability, but they do illuminate

Abstract

The recent reorganization of New Orleans schools offers a unique opportunity to examine differences in the policies and practices of charter and traditional schools. RAND researchers surveyed principals, teachers, and parents in both types of schools. They found higher levels of satisfaction and a perception of more choices among charter school parents. This raises the question of whether citywide school choice is equally accessible and navigable by all.

similarities and differences among the schools represented. The researchers also used public data to examine school performance in relation to school characteristics.

Governance and Operations: Charter School Principals Report More Control

As one might expect, charter school principals reported having greater control than their traditional school counterparts over many leadership and decisionmaking practices, including instructional practices, staff hiring and discipline, student assessments, budgeting, and curriculum. Although both charter and traditional school principals reported that their schools offered nursing, social-work, counseling, and speech-therapy services, charter school principals were more likely to report that they used outside contractors to provide these services.

Nevertheless, the surveys found some similarities in governance practices. Principals at both types of schools reported having steering committees that met weekly or monthly. Teachers in both types of schools reported meeting regularly to discuss student assessment, instruction, and discipline issues.

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Corporate Headquarters
 1776 Main Street
 P.O. Box 2138
 Santa Monica, California
 90407-2138
 TEL 310.393.0411
 FAX 310.393.4818

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In short, although the surveys indicated that charter and traditional schools differed in terms of school autonomy and provision of services, they found little evidence of marked differences in school-level leadership and decisionmaking practices.

Educational Contexts: Many Similarities, Except in Challenges to Improving Student Achievement

Charter and traditional school educators reported many similarities in their time allocations, academic programs, and instructional practices. Principals reported an average school year of 177 days and an average school day of 7.1 hours in charter schools, versus 179 days and 7.6 hours in traditional schools. However, 70 percent of charter school principals reported that their schools offered extended-day programs, versus only 22 percent of traditional school principals.

Teachers at charter schools were as likely as those at traditional schools to report that their schools had a strong sense of mission. They also reported devoting almost identical shares of instructional time to activities that promoted higher-order thinking skills, were based on real-life situations, or required students to work independently.

The most critical difference in educational contexts was in perceived challenges to improving student achievement. Both principals and teachers rated such challenges as parent involvement, student discipline, and student transfers as more serious in traditional schools than in charter schools.

Educator Qualifications and Mobility: Similarities in Preparation, Training, Development, and Career Plans

Counterintuitively, charter school principals were more likely than their traditional school counterparts to have hired a teacher directly from a teacher licensure program and less likely to have hired from an alternative-route program, such as Teach for America. A plausible explanation is that many of the traditional schools faced greater hiring challenges and thus were more reliant on alternative sources.

Principals reported teacher retention rates to be similar in charter schools (87 percent) and traditional schools (81 percent). About 74 percent of responding teachers from both types of schools said they planned to return to the same school the following year.

Overall, the charter and traditional schools in the sample did not differ notably in their human resource policies and practices, including hiring priorities and needs, incentives, or professional development offerings.

Parental Choice and Involvement: Parents More Satisfied with Charter Schools

Charter school principals reported larger student applicant pools, lower acceptance rates, and lower rates of transfer than traditional schools in the system of citywide school choice. This is likely because charter schools can cap their enrollments.

Parents choosing charter or traditional schools cited different reasons for their choices. Charter school parents were most likely to choose their children's school because of its curriculum, student achievement record, and discipline policies. Traditional school parents were most likely to choose their children's school because of its proximity, transportation availability, or the sense that it was the only school available.

Charter school parents reported higher satisfaction with their children's schools overall and in terms of location, safety, educational quality, discipline, and communication. They also perceived a greater sense of choice in selecting their children's schools.

School Performance in Relation to School Characteristics: Few Differences Related to Charter School Status

Among schools in the RSD, which consisted of schools that had been failing before the citywide reorganization, charter schools showed higher 2008–2009 Louisiana School Performance Scores than traditional schools did. However, both charter and traditional schools in the RSD underperformed charter and traditional schools in the OPSB. Neither charter or district status nor information from teacher surveys about school policies, staffing, and instruction reliably predicted growth in a school's performance scores from year to year.

Conclusion

Altogether, the research indicates many similarities between New Orleans's charter and traditional schools in governance, educational contexts, and staffing priorities. However, teachers and principals in traditional schools did report greater challenges, especially regarding parent involvement, student discipline, and student transfers.

In addition, charter school parents reported greater satisfaction with their schools. One possible explanation involves the slightly higher average socioeconomic status of charter school students in the city. Given that charter school parents reported having a greater sense of choice than their traditional school counterparts, there remains a question of whether citywide choice is equally accessible and navigable by all families. ■

This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *The Transformation of a School System: Principal, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Charter and Traditional Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, by Jennifer L. Steele, Georges Vernez, Michael A. Gottfried, and Michael Schwam-Baird, TR-1145-TUV, 2011, 164 pp. (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1145.html). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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