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R E P O R T

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# The Transformation of a School System

Principal, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions  
of Charter and Traditional Schools in  
Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Prepared for the Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University

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## Summary

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### Context

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 triggered a dramatic overhaul of the public education system in New Orleans, Louisiana. Two months after the hurricane, in November 2005, the state of Louisiana took over nearly all of the district's schools and began developing a radically different system of schools featuring charter schools and parental choice. Before Katrina, the New Orleans Public School District was one of the nation's most beleaguered districts, and only a handful of charter schools existed in the city (Boston Consulting Group, 2007). As of the spring of 2010, however, the city was home to 62 charter schools, which jointly served 61 percent of its more than 38,000 public school students (Cowen Institute, 2010; New Orleans Parent Organizing Network, 2010). New Orleans is the first city in the nation to implement a charter-school model at this scale (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010a).

Administrative authority over public schools in the city is now primarily divided between two separate districts. The largest is the Recovery School District (RSD), which is overseen by the state and includes 71 of the city's 90 public schools. The other district is run by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). It is a remnant of the pre-Katrina school district and oversees 17 schools that were not taken over by the RSD because of low performance. Schools run by the OPSB thus tend to be among the city's highest-performing schools and, as was true before the storm, a subset are selective admission schools (Boston Consulting Group, 2007).

Consistent with the state's mission to decentralize public education in New Orleans and introduce competition, both the RSD and the OPSB operate a set of traditional schools and oversee their own portfolios of charter schools. In addition, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) oversees two schools in the city, both of which are charter schools. Each New Orleans charter school, in turn, is managed day to day by one of more than 30 charter operating organizations (Save Our Schools NOLA, 2008).

Because New Orleans is the first city in the nation to carry out a charter-based reform at this scale, its experiences have direct implications not only for the future of the city's public education system but also for the national conversation about charter schools and choice. Despite the growing prevalence of charter schools nationally during the past two decades, these schools remain controversial (Henig, 2008). Advocates argue that charter schools' freedom from administrative bureaucracy allows innovation to flourish and that the market and policy pressure facing schools in a system of choice can ultimately raise the quality of schooling options for all students (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Hill and Celio, 1998; Lake, 2010). Meanwhile, critics worry that charter schools siphon critical funds and the most motivated families

away from traditional public schools. This concern has been voiced with particular vigor in New Orleans, where the traditional schools run by the RSD are sometimes viewed as schools of last resort in comparison to RSD charter schools and to OPSB charter and traditional schools (Cowen Institute, 2008).<sup>1</sup> RSD traditional schools also serve a more racially segregated and economically disadvantaged population of students than do other schools in the city (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2010).

Research on the effectiveness of charter schools relative to traditional schools in raising student achievement and attainment has shown mixed effects as well as considerable variation among charter schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009; Hoxby and Rockoff, 2004; Lake, 2008; Zimmer et al., 2009). In addition, there has been only limited research on how charter schools differ from their traditional school counterparts in terms of operations, instruction, personnel, and relationships to students' families (Gross and Pochop, 2008; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010b). Consequently, the aim of this study was to shed additional light on prominent local and national questions about how charter school practices differ from those of their traditional school counterparts. However, it is important to clarify that the noncharter schools in this study, which we refer to as "traditional schools," operate alongside their charter school counterparts in a post-Katrina system of citywide school choice and in the absence of collective bargaining. This context is very different from the pre-Katrina system of neighborhood-based school assignments within a single district in which teachers maintained collective bargaining rights (Boston Consulting Group, 2007). Moreover, because the RSD and OPSB districts oversee both charter and non-charter schools, and some in the OPSB maintain selective admission policies, our examination of charter and "traditional" schools post-Katrina represents merely one way of examining a complex and multifaceted "system of schools" (Cowen Institute, 2008, p. 3). For this reason, we report in many cases on supplemental findings disaggregated by both district (RSD versus OPSB) and type (charter versus traditional), and we acknowledge that the traditional schools we refer to in post-Katrina New Orleans operate within a decidedly nontraditional context.

The complex assortment of schools and school operators in post-Katrina New Orleans presents an unusual opportunity for researchers to examine the operational, instructional, human capital, and family outreach policies and practices of charter and traditional schools. Seeing this, Tulane University's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 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 post-Katrina New Orleans. RAND and the Cowen Institute then collaborated to design and administer a set of surveys directly to principals, teachers, and parents in both traditional and charter schools in the city.

In this technical report, we examine charter and traditional schools' policies and practices in four central dimensions of interest: governance and operations, educational contexts, educator quality and mobility, and parents' choice of and involvement in their children's schools. The four dimensions represent prominent local policy concerns, including teacher qualifications and parental access and choice, as well as topics of school governance and instructional contexts that have been identified by charter school research and theory as warranting additional understanding. A fifth topic provides a descriptive analysis of the relationship between school

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<sup>1</sup> As noted above, the schools allowed to remain in the OPSB after the storm were already the city's highest performing. Several were selective admission schools, and some OPSB charter schools retain that status today (New Orleans Parent Organizing Network, 2010).

characteristics and schools' academic performance during the survey year, 2008–09. Our specific research questions were as follows:

1. How do New Orleans' charter and traditional schools differ in terms of their governance and organizational practices, as reported by principals and teachers?
2. How do New Orleans' charter and traditional schools differ with regard to their educational contexts, including instructional practices and learning environments, as described by principals, teachers, and parents?
3. How do New Orleans' charter and traditional schools differ in terms of the qualifications and mobility of their teachers and principals, as reported by those individuals?
4. How do New Orleans' charter and traditional schools differ with regard to their efforts to engage parents and in terms of parents' experiences with the schools, as described by principals, teachers, and parents?
5. How do charter and traditional schools differ in terms of school performance and performance growth, and what, if any, observable school characteristics or practices are associated with these differences?

## Methods and Limitations

For this study, we sent surveys to the principals of 75 of the 86 public schools operational in school year 2008–09, 42 in charter and 33 in traditional, district-run schools. We excluded schools that were newly constituted in 2008–09 and consisted of only a few grades. In addition, we surveyed a random sample of 436 teachers of elementary education, secondary English/language arts, and secondary mathematics, stratified by grade level and subject area, and representing the 59 schools that provided teacher rosters from which we could draw the random sample. We also sent parent surveys to 411 parents from the 55 schools that provided mailing addresses for the randomly drawn sample or agreed to distribute the surveys based on our instructions for drawing a random sample.

Survey questionnaires were mailed to principals and to sampled teachers and parents in the spring of 2009. The principal survey asked about enrollment, admission policies, academic programs, governance, accountability, teachers, professional development, operations, and school finance. The teacher survey asked about school governance, instructional feedback, professional development, instructional methods, parent communications and involvement, and teachers' career plans and professional backgrounds. The parent survey inquired about parents' choice of school, the school's academic programs, school communications, parent involvement, and parents' demographic backgrounds. Follow-up surveys, emails, and (in some cases) phone calls were sent to nonrespondents. Final response rates were approximately 32 percent for principals, 52 percent for teachers, and 36 percent for parents. Of 75 schools targeted by the surveys, principal survey respondents represented 24 schools (10 charter and 14 traditional), teacher survey respondents represented 57 schools (36 charter and 21 traditional), and parent survey respondents represented 51 schools (30 charter and 21 traditional). Overlap among schools represented by principal, teacher, and parent respondents was imperfect, with 32 of the 75 targeted schools represented by both teacher and parent respondents, and only 15 of 75 targeted schools represented in all three survey samples.

Survey data were tabulated using Stata 10.0 (StataCorp, 2007), disaggregated by charter versus traditional school type and, in some cases, also by district (OPSB or BESE versus RSD). Teachers' and parents' responses were adjusted to reflect the nesting of individuals within schools. In addition, we used ordinary least squares and multilevel regression analyses to describe the relationship between aggregate school performance in the survey year and school characteristics, including but not limited to school characteristics reported on the teacher surveys.

Most of the schools that participated in the teacher and parent surveys were represented by at least one respondent (97 percent of schools participating in the teacher surveys and 93 percent of those participating in the parent survey, respectively), and these represent 76 percent and 73 percent, respectively, of the 75 targeted schools. However, overall response rates were lower than anticipated. Because respondents within a school may differ systematically from nonrespondents, nonresponse bias is a possible threat to the interpretation of data from these surveys. Moreover, because schools willing to participate in the surveys may differ from those not willing to do so, teachers' and parents' survey responses cannot be generalized to all of the targeted schools. Also, because we received principal survey responses from only 32 percent of the 75 targeted schools, it is not possible to generalize those results to other charter and traditional schools in the city.

Other limitations associated with reliance on survey data include imprecision in participants' responses, as well as social desirability bias, although participants were assured that their responses would be treated as confidential. In addition, it is important to emphasize that our results are descriptive. Because differences among schools in terms of their survey results or their performance data may be due to unmeasured characteristics, there is no basis for drawing causal inferences about any of the relationships described in the report. Another critical limitation is that the survey results were captured at a single point in time so may not reflect more recent developments in the city's schools. Moreover, because we do not have parallel survey data from the years before Hurricane Katrina, our data do not permit even descriptive conclusions about how the schools in New Orleans have changed since the time before the storm or as a result of the citywide reform. As noted above, what is clear is that New Orleans schools now function in a dynamic, choice-based context, which means that even those schools we refer to in this report as "traditional" are operating within a nontraditional and swiftly changing public education environment.

## **Summary of Findings**

The survey responses revealed both similarities and differences by school type (charter versus traditional) in schools' practices and parents' experiences. The following summary highlights key findings in each of our four domains of interest—governance and operations, educational contexts, educator quality and mobility, and parental choice and involvement. It also describes key findings about observed relationships between particular school characteristics and school performance.

### **Governance and Operations**

As the largely independent nature of charter schools would suggest, principals reported having greater control over many leadership and decisionmaking practices of their schools, including

instructional practices, staff hiring and discipline, student assessments, budgeting, and curriculum. Nevertheless, both charter and traditional school principals placed similar ratings of importance on each of these categories.

The governance of charter and traditional schools where principals completed surveys appeared similar in many regards.

- Principals at both types of schools reported having steering committees that met about weekly or monthly, and teachers in both types of schools also reported meeting regularly to discuss issues relating to student assessments, instruction, and discipline.
- According to principal respondents, charter and traditional schools differed in terms of the providers of a variety of their operational services. In traditional schools, such functions as transportation, food services, and facility maintenance were reportedly carried out by the district, whereas the majority of responding charter school principals said that they contracted out for such services.
- Similarly, although most responding charter and traditional school principals reported that their schools offered nursing, social work, counseling, and speech therapy services, 10 to 30 percent of charter school principals reported contracting for such services, whereas none of the traditional school principals reported using contractors.

In short, the governance and operational practices of charter and traditional schools in the response samples differed with regard to schools' autonomy and provision of services, but we found little evidence that they differed markedly in school-level leadership and decision-making practices.

### **Educational Contexts**

When we examined the educational contexts of charter and traditional schools in New Orleans, including their allocation of instructional time, course offerings and programs, and instructional practices, we again found few meaningful differences between the practices reported by principals, teachers, and to some extent, parents. Key findings were as follows:

- According to principals, neither the length of the school year or school day was notably different between charter and traditional schools. Specifically, the average reported school year length was 177 days in the former and 179 in the latter, and the average school day was reportedly 7.1 hours in the former and 7.6 in the latter.
- Teachers at charter schools reported stronger agreement than traditional school teachers with the statement that it was easy to maintain discipline at their schools (2.5 versus 1.9 on a scale of 1 to 4), though their responses were similar in terms of other school climate dimensions, such as the school having a strong sense of mission.
- Teachers in charter and traditional schools reported almost no meaningful differences in terms of their instructional practices. For instance, teachers in charter and traditional schools reported devoting an almost identical share of instructional time to activities that promoted higher-order thinking skills (about 30 percent of instructional time), were based on real-life situations (about 23 percent), required students to work independently (about 21 percent), and involved thematic instruction (about 12 percent).

The most critical differences that emerged between charter and traditional schools in terms of educational contexts involved educators' perceived challenges to improving student achievement. Principal and teacher respondents rated all 12 potential challenges presented to them (most notably, parent involvement, student discipline, and student transfers) as more serious in traditional schools than in charter schools, with the exception of facilities, which was rated as the most prominent challenge among charter school principals.

### **Educator Qualifications and Mobility**

Our inquiry into educator qualifications and mobility examined the preparation, training, professional development experiences, and career plans of the surveyed teachers and principals. Key findings included the following:

- Among responding principals, those at charter schools reported being somewhat more likely than their traditional school counterparts to have hired a teacher directly from a traditional licensure program (16 percent versus 7 percent of their newly hired teachers, respectively), whereas charter school principals were reportedly less likely than their traditional school counterparts to have hired a teacher from the alternative route program Teach for America. However, this counterintuitive finding is most prominent in the RSD, where the district maintained a nonbinding contract with Teach for America stating that it planned to hire a certain number of its corps members each year (Carr, 2009a).
- Charter and traditional school principals gave similar ratings of teachers they had hired from traditional versus alternative licensure programs, rating the former at 3.3 on a satisfaction scale of 1 to 4, versus 2.8 for Teach for America Teachers.
- Charter and traditional school principals described encountering similar hiring difficulties, which were reportedly greatest in science, foreign languages, and mathematics, with 25, 21, and 17 percent of respondents reporting difficulties in each of these subjects, respectively.
- Teachers also reported a similar distribution of preparation routes and educational attainment levels, regardless of whether they worked in charter or traditional schools. The largest proportion of respondents (69 percent in charter schools and 73 percent in traditional schools) said that they held only a bachelor's degree.
- Traditional school teachers reported having about 3.3 more years of experience than their charter school counterparts, at 13 versus 9.7 years, on average. This difference in average experience level also accounted for a slightly higher average salary level reported by traditional school teacher respondents than their charter school counterparts.
- Charter school teachers reported receiving about 21 fewer hours, on average, of professional development than their traditional school counterparts, at 70 versus 91 hours during the school year and preceding summer.
- Charter and traditional school principals reported that the proportion of teachers returning to the school from the prior year was quite high, at 87 and 81 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, about 74 percent of teachers reported that they planned to return to their current schools the following year, and the difference between charter and traditional schools was not substantively noteworthy.
- Two-thirds of responding charter school principals and all responding traditional school principals reported holding an administrative credential.

Taken together, the survey results suggest that charter and traditional schools did not differ notably in terms of their human resource policies and practices, including their hiring priorities and needs, incentive structures, or professional development offerings. Teachers' anticipated career plans also did not differ notably between charter and traditional schools.

### **Parental Choice and Involvement**

Finally, the surveys asked principals, teachers, and parents about their schools' recruitment, admissions, and parental outreach practices, and they asked parents specifically about their experiences in an environment of citywide school choice. Key findings were as follows:

- According to principals' reports, charter schools had larger applicant pools, lower acceptance rates, and lower rates of transfer into and out of the schools during the academic year than their traditional school counterparts. A likely explanation for the lower acceptance rates is that charter schools are permitted to cap their enrollments.
- The reasons parents gave for their choice of schools differed markedly between charter and traditional schools. When parents were asked why they chose their child's current school, the most common reason given by charter school respondents was the school's academic curriculum, followed by its record of student achievement and its attendance and discipline policies (chosen by 37 percent, 32 percent, and 27 percent, respectively). In contrast, the most common reason given by traditional school respondents was that the school provided transportation; the next reasons given were that the child could walk to school or use public transportation and the sense that it was the only school available to them (chosen by 43 percent, 30 percent, and 19 percent, respectively).
- Parents whose children attended charter schools reported higher satisfaction with their child's school overall and with several facets of the school, including its location, safety, educational quality, and discipline, as well as its communication about community services and volunteer opportunities, special education services, and gifted and talented education services. For instance, on a scale of 1 to 4, the average rating of educational quality was 3.6 among charter school parents and only 3.0 among traditional school parents. In addition, 41 percent of charter school parents gave their child's school a letter grade of A on a scale of A to F, as opposed to only 18 percent of traditional school parents.

In short, although survey responses showed few notable differences between charter and traditional schools with regard to their governance practices, educational and instructional contexts, and human resource practices, we found numerous differences in terms of the perceptions and experiences of charter and traditional school parents. Charter school parents perceived a greater sense of choice and greater satisfaction with their children's schools, on average, than their counterparts in traditional schools.

### **School Performance in Relation to School Characteristics**

Our analysis of school performance made use of the School Performance Scores (SPS) generated annually by the state of Louisiana, which are based on student test scores, dropout/graduation rates, and attendance. It focused on the 75 established New Orleans schools included in our 2008–09 target survey sample, and it used school data from the 2008–09 academic year, including baseline and end-of-year SPS scores. In examining the baseline scores, we estimated that RSD schools markedly underperformed in comparison to OPSB and BESE schools, even

though the relationship between charter status and student achievement was positive only in the RSD and only when student demographics, school grade levels, and a school's admission policies (selective or open) were held constant.<sup>2</sup> However, none of these characteristics were statistically significant predictors of growth from baseline to the end-of-year scores.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, information we gathered from the teacher surveys about their respective schools' policies, teachers, and instruction—including professional development, class size, instructional practices, parent outreach, teacher experience, and teacher mobility plans—did not predict growth in a school's SPS among the schools represented in the teacher survey sample.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusions

New Orleans has been on the cutting edge of choice-based school reform efforts in the years since Hurricane Katrina struck the city. However, even six years after the hurricane, questions remain about the variation in schools' policies and practices in the wake of the reform and about parents' experiences in an environment of school choice. This study set out to address some of those questions through surveys of principals, teachers, and parents. In particular, we sought to uncover similarities and differences between charter and traditional schools with regard to the schools' governance and operational practices, educational contexts, educator qualifications and mobility, and parents' perceptions and experiences.

We found few differences between charter and traditional schools in terms of their school-based leadership practices, though the principals of charter schools did report having more autonomy than their traditional school counterparts. They also reported contracting out for some services, such as transportation, food services, and facilities maintenance, that were provided by the district in traditional schools.

Regarding educational contexts, principals and teachers again reported similar instructional practices regardless of whether they worked in charter or traditional schools, though teachers and principals in traditional schools reported facing greater challenges than their charter school counterparts, particularly in terms of parent involvement, student discipline, and student transfers. There were also few reported differences between charter and traditional schools in terms of their hiring priorities and needs, incentive structures, or professional development offerings. A key area in which differences did emerge, however, involved the perceptions and experiences of parents. Parents of students in charter schools perceived a greater sense of choice and greater satisfaction with their children's schools, on average, than their counterparts in traditional schools.

Moreover, charter school parents in the sample and charter school students in the city appeared more advantaged, on average, than their traditional school counterparts. Thus, one possible explanation for the difference in satisfaction and challenges may involve systematic differences between families enrolling their children in charter and traditional schools. Given that charter school parents who responded to the survey reported having a greater sense of choice than their traditional school counterparts, a lingering policy question is whether the

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<sup>2</sup> This analysis was limited to the 71 schools in the targeted sample for which baseline scores were available.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the 53 schools for which SPS growth scores were available.

<sup>4</sup> Based on 43 schools with teacher survey data and SPS growth scores available.

system of citywide choice is equally accessible and navigable by all citizens of New Orleans. The parent responses we received would suggest that it may not be.

The fact that information about the policies and practices of New Orleans schools has not previously been available in the post-Katrina context also suggests the need for more mechanisms by which charter and traditional schools can share best practices and learn from their peers' innovations. Finally, we would encourage the development of stronger ties between the research and practice communities in New Orleans. Strengthened ties and coordinated data collection efforts may help fortify future efforts to inform policymakers and families about the range of school policies and practices under way in the city.