

Charter Schools in New Orleans

Lessons for Massachusetts

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Executive Summary

How many innovators have imagined ways they would fix a failing school system if they could start from the beginning? If only the historical entanglements of traditional schools weren't in the way. If only long-standing relationships did not prevent decisive action. If only community groups could work in unison instead of competing for scarce resources.

What could they do with a clean slate?

Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Louisiana state officials and education leaders in New Orleans were forced to rebuild a public school system that had literally been washed away. The storm destroyed school buildings, scattered students and displaced teachers.

But a crisis can lead to great change. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Legislature had approved a measure to empower a state entity to take control of chronically failing schools. Little used at first, the law was expanded after the hurricane and the Recovery School District took control of most of the Orleans Parish public schools. That policy decision set in motion the creation of a new decentralized school system in New Orleans, made up primarily of charter schools. Numerous existing or newly formed community organizations stepped forward to provide essential support. State financial resources were complemented by investment from foundations and education providers outside of Louisiana.

As comeback stories go, the revival of k-12 public school education in New Orleans is one for the record books. More than 60 percent of public school students in New Orleans attended a school designated as “failing” by state performance standards before the

hurricane. By the 2011-2012 school year, only 13 percent of students attended a failing school. The definition of failing schools has since been revised, and 40 percent of students go to failing schools. Yet even with the stricter standards, officials still expect the percentage of students attending failing schools to be less than 5 percent by 2016.¹

While the remarkable turnaround in New Orleans was accelerated - and perhaps even made possible - by the very storm that nearly destroyed the city, it still has education experts looking for lessons that might be applied elsewhere. This paper looks at the public school reform efforts of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and its impact on student achievement. It also offers recommendations on how urban public schools in Massachusetts, which historically underperforms the commonwealth's suburban school districts, could benefit from New Orleans' experience.

Does it take a natural disaster to spur radical change among traditional public school systems or can motivated leaders decide it's time their schools stopped failing?

An Overview of New Orleans Education Reform Efforts

The change in the status quo of public education in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina was welcomed by many. But the transformation of the school system began before the storm hit. In 2003 the Louisiana Legislature created the Recovery School District, a statewide area run by the Louisiana Department of Education to take over underperforming schools.

There was particular concern with the troubled schools of New Orleans, under the direction of the Orleans Parish School Board. In the years leading up to the storm,

the Orleans Parish School Board and the schools' central administration were rife with corruption, controversy and ineffective management. In 2004 a special FBI task force was assigned to investigate the school system, and 11 employees were indicted for criminal financial offenses.

Financial problems pushed the system to the brink of bankruptcy in the school year before Hurricane Katrina hit. In March 2005, auditors said the school system was out of money, and there were calls for the state to take over the district's finances.²

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, the start of the new school year. A storm surge breeched the levees protecting the city, flooding most of New Orleans. In addition to more than 1,000 deaths, all 65,000 public school students were forced to evacuate the city. The storm also battered the public school facilities. More than two-thirds of the district's 300-plus buildings were left in "poor" or "very poor" condition due to storm damage and long-deferred maintenance.³

In November of 2005, the Louisiana Legislature approved a take-over of the majority of public schools in New Orleans, shifting 107 low-performing schools under the Orleans Parish School Board to the Recovery School District, which was under the command of the Louisiana Department of Education. Decisions to take over schools were made based on the state accountability system, which had been in place before Katrina and provided objective performance measures for the actions of the Recovery School District.

The significance of the RSD

The Recovery School District was not a reaction to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Rather it was created to allow the

state to take over chronically failing public schools, bring more accountability into the Orleans Parish school system and ensure that the difficult decisions that would create real change were actually made.

"There was a committed effort to recognizing that some of our schools were not meeting the needs of our children and we needed to do something different to meet their needs," says Sarah Usdin, founder of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit group. "Having a government entity that has the authority to make significant changes in schools and the discernment and the willingness to do it is very important."⁴

"Outsiders bring more objectivity," says Kenneth Campbell, president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, a group devoted to increasing educational options for African-American children based in New Orleans. "They don't have to deal with preexisting relationships that have gone on for a long time. They don't have to deal with people they hired and now they have to remove. They don't have to deal with friends and colleagues."⁵

Prior to the storm, five New Orleans schools had been taken over by the state because of poor performance and were being operated by charter school managers.⁶ When the RSD's authority was expanded after Hurricane Katrina, it assumed control over more than 100 public schools and dramatically diminished the role of the Orleans Parish School Board. It was the first step in New Orleans' transition from an autonomous district-run school system to one that became more entrepreneurial and locally managed.

"The removal of the traditional form of governance of our public school system took the Orleans Parish School Board out of the

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picture from a decision-making, governing point of view and opened the door to it being much more innovative and progressive,” says Caroline Roemer, executive director of the Louisiana Association of Charter Public Schools.⁷

The Orleans Parish School Board did retain control over 16 schools following the storm, 12 of which were reopened as charter schools. The RSD reopened seven schools during its first year, four charters and three schools that it ran directly. It was the start of a commitment to charter public schools. By the 2011-2012 school year, the RSD had reopened 49 charter schools, the Orleans Parish School Board had authority over 11 charter schools and five other charter schools were under the direction of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Converting the district’s schools to charter schools was the early strategy in part because money was available to do it. Charter operators were able to access a \$20.9 million federal grant earmarked specifically for charter schools.⁸ Additionally, a number of private foundations, such as the Walton Family Foundation, and individuals also provided funding.

But New Orleans officials were also moving their schools away from a single school system toward a system of charters. Charter laws were already in place and there was a desire to get away from the top down control that had failed with the Orleans Parish School Board. This was a chance to put more decision-making at the school level.

“It was available for people who wanted to try something different,” says Usdin. “We wanted to empower teachers and principals to give them autonomy while also holding them accountable.”⁹

To support the recovery of New Orleans public schools, numerous non-profit groups emerged and several outside education organizations came to the city. New Schools for New Orleans started in 2006 as a broad organization that could support academic achievement in the schools. TeachNOLA, a partnership between the RSD, New Schools for New Orleans, the Jefferson Parish Public School System and The New Teacher Project (TNTP) also began in 2006 as a teacher training program. In 2007 groups such as Building Excellent Schools, New Leaders for New Schools and Edison Learning began work or opened schools in the city. Others such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options and Louisiana Stands for Children became active in advocating for pro-reform policies.

These nonprofits were critical to enable a decentralized system to plant roots and grow.

“The RSD doesn’t have a big central administrative structure in New Orleans and charter schools don’t have that either,” says Campbell. “That’s where the local nonprofits have picked up the slack in being able to advocate for certain things and make sure that we stay focused on quality, to fight for what schools need and also to hold schools accountable. That’s a critical role if you’re going to go with a decentralized system and this portfolio approach.”

A number of other obstacles that have slowed change in other urban areas were removed by the hurricane or by an increasingly progressive attitude in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina many families relocated away from New Orleans. With the schools devastated and students scattered, the financially-strapped Orleans Parish School Board terminated its collective bargaining agreement with the

teachers' union, essentially breaking up the union.¹⁰ Public schools in New Orleans also created a city-wide system of school choice by ending neighborhood attendance zones. The number of charter schools and direct-run RSD schools grew, and students were allowed to attend any of them, regardless of where they lived in the city.

The Reform Efforts and Student Achievement in New Orleans

New Orleans' reform effort is six years old and – in structural terms – almost complete. Nearly 85 percent of public school students attend charter schools and more than 5 percent of students use vouchers to attend private schools. But how are the reforms working? There are two ways to answer the question:

1. Is the new system of schools in New Orleans providing a better education to students than the previous system?
2. Are charter schools in New Orleans currently outperforming traditional public schools?

Is the new system of schools providing a better education to students?

The overhaul of the New Orleans system was so complete that every child who returned to a New Orleans school enrolled in a fundamentally different system. As a result, it's impossible to make an apples-to-apples comparison. Yet, the question can be explored by analyzing non-experimental data which can aid policy makers in understanding the impact of the recent reform efforts.

Quantitative Student Achievement Evidence

One way to look at New Orleans' student achievement performance is to compare it to statewide figures for Louisiana before and after Hurricane Katrina.

Policy makers often use similar analyses when experimental evidence is unavailable. For example, PISA and TIMSS test scores are used to measure the performance of U.S. students vs. other countries over time. Similarly, comparing state level NAEP scores with national averages provides some window into the effectiveness of state level reforms. Lastly, looking at city-state comparisons helps control for the state's tendency to manipulate cut scores in a manner that increases proficiency rates. The major drawback in any such analysis is that the composition of the comparison groups can change over time.

Chart 1 details the percentage of students – in both New Orleans and the state as a whole – achieving proficiency on the Louisiana state summative assessment between 2000 and 2011. This data gives a broad picture of student achievement before and after Hurricane Katrina in both New Orleans and the state as a whole.

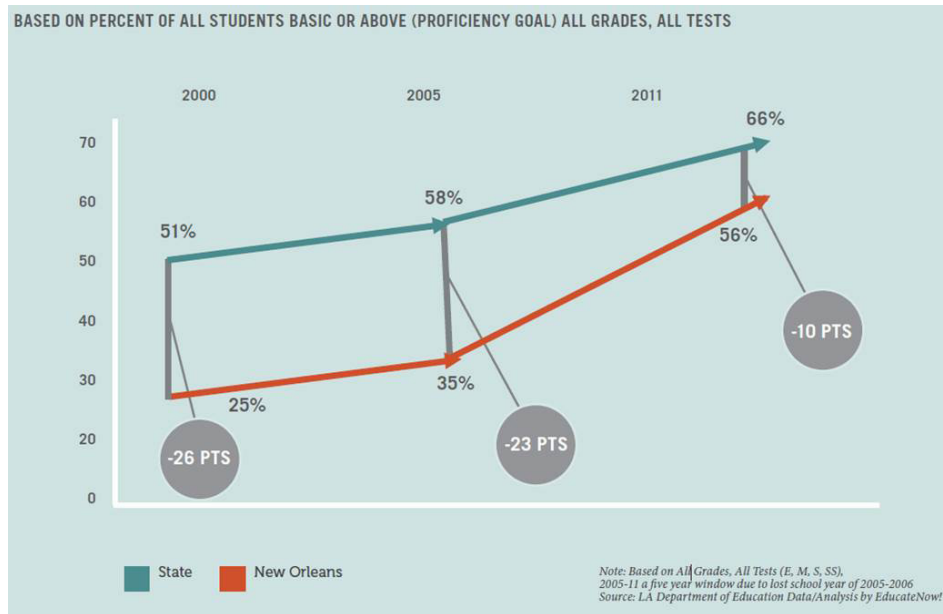
Since 2000, New Orleans has closed much of the achievement gap with the state of Louisiana. Furthermore, the vast majority of this gap closure has occurred since 2005 (after Hurricane Katrina) – when the gap decreased from 23 percentage points to 10 percentage points.

- Between 2000 and 2005 New Orleans reduced the city-state gap by 11 percent – at a rate of 2.1 percent a year.
- Between 2005 and 2011, New Orleans reduced the city-state gap by 57 percent – at a rate of 9.5 percent a year.¹¹
- Since 2005, New Orleans has been closing the city-state achievement gap at 4.5 times the pre 2005 rate.

This data provides non-experimental quantitative evidence that the new system

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Chart 1: Student Proficiency on the Louisiana State Summative Assessment between 2000 and 2011



of schools is increasing student achievement at a more accelerated pace than the previous system.

Are the Students the Same?

Common sense might lead one to the conclusion that a student population will be more difficult to serve following a natural disaster. However, population return rates could undermine this conclusion – especially if, on average, those residents with wealth and intact family structures were most able to return. But if students of differing abilities and socioeconomic conditions were being educated before and after Hurricane Katrina, then the city-state analysis is less meaningful.

Table 1 summarizes public school student population and characteristics for pre- and post-Katrina, and provides a high level overview of student body composition trends.

The student population dropped significantly after Katrina while the percentage of students receiving free lunch increased by a notable margin. This is in contrast to trends in overall population return, which point to returning residents being on average wealthier than permanently displaced residents.¹² Given that most wealthy New Orleanians send their children to private schools, it is not surprising that overall population trends do not reflect those of the public school system student body.

Table 1: Student Population Pre- and Post-Katrina

	Pre-Katrina	Post-Katrina (10/1/11)	% Change
Student Population	62,000	42,000	-32%
African-American	93%	88%	-5%
Free Lunch	73%	79%	+6%
Reduced Lunch	4%	4%	-

Yet the statistics do not fully describe the population. A student with both parents in prison and living in foster care will likely be more challenging to educate than a student being raised by recently unemployed parents who are actively engaged in their child's education.

Not surprisingly, the rates of mental health suffering increased dramatically after Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans mental health rates are also not following traditional post-disaster patterns. Instead of declining a year after the disaster – as has been found to occur in similar events – the mental health rates in New Orleans remain stubbornly high.

A study from RAND, based on post-Katrina survey data, reported that:

[Researchers] found very high levels of mental illness among the population: Nearly 40 percent had probable mental illness one year after the storm, and half of these illnesses were classified as severe. These rates were substantially higher than rates of mental illness prior to Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf States region. According to the National Comorbidity Survey Replication study conducted between 2001 and 2003, rates of severe, moderate, and any mental illness were estimated at 6 percent, 10 percent, and 16 percent, respectively. The high levels of mental illness suggest that the prevalence of mental illness may not have declined in the year following the hurricane – finding that differs from the pattern described in most previous research on mental illness following disasters.¹³

A more comprehensive study from University of Massachusetts, Harvard, and Princeton researchers tracked the mental health information of specific individuals before

and after the storm, which allowed them to go one step further than examining broader geographical trend rates:

Based on established cutoffs ([Kessler et al., 2003](#)), the prevalence of mild-moderate or serious mental illness (MMI/SMI) rose from 23.5 percent to 37.5 percent (McNemar test $p < .001$), and that of probable serious mental illness (SMI) doubled (6.9 percent to 14.3 percent, $p < .001$). The prevalence of high perceived stress (scale score > 7) rose from 20.2 percent to 30.9 percent ($p < .001$). All physical health outcomes also experienced statistically significant increases in prevalence. PTSD symptoms were not assessed prior to the hurricane. At the time of the post-Katrina survey, 47.7 percent of participants were classified as having probable PTSD (average IES-R item score > 1.5) ([Weiss & Marmar, 1997](#)).¹⁴

This data shows that adults who lived in New Orleans before and after Katrina experienced significant mental health declines. A similar study has yet to be conducted on children in New Orleans, but it is highly plausible that children are either experiencing mental health declines or are being negatively affected by the mental health declines of the adults in their lives.

So the data shows that the students being served before and after Hurricane Katrina are not the same. Post-Katrina, more students qualify for free lunch eligibility than pre-Katrina. Additionally, more adults suffer from severe mental health issues than before the storm. All of which makes it unlikely that the free lunch rates are masking unobserved, positive characteristics in poor students that are driving increases in student achievement.

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Are Schools Receiving More Money?

Another possible explanation for post-Katrina achievement increases is that the system itself is simply better funded. Had the previous system received similar levels of funding, it too would have performed at current levels. Table 2, from the Cowen Institute, details per-pupil expenditures from 2002, 2005, and 2009:¹⁵

Funding to New Orleans public schools increased significantly from 2002 to 2009, with much of these increases occurring after 2005. The state also increased its overall funding levels, though at a slower rate than New Orleans, which received significant post-hurricane dollars. Relative to the state, New Orleans now receives more funds than in 2002.

However, post-Katrina recovery funds make it difficult to separate out the effects of one-time funding allocations from long-term sustainable revenue. The funding levels of RSD charter schools provide a better picture of sustainable revenues. RSD charter schools revenue is restricted to:

- 98 percent of their state funding allocation (the government takes a 2 percent governance fee)
- direct federal funding, as they operate as their own local education agencies
- philanthropic funds

As such, their per-pupil rates provide a truer picture of non-hurricane related expenditures.

If the RSD charter per-pupil funding is used as the basis for city-state comparison, the difference between New Orleans per-pupil and the Louisiana per-pupil funding has remained relatively constant. The state slightly outspent New Orleans in 2002, 2005, and 2009. Yet, despite these relatively stable funding rates, New Orleans closed the city-state gap at a much higher rate between 2005 and 2009 than during the 2002-2005 period.

The bottom line is that New Orleans schools are receiving more money than they were before Hurricane Katrina. But once hurricane related funds are backed out, the funding statewide has increased at roughly the same rate as the city. In comparison to the state, RSD charter schools are no better off than their pre-hurricane New Orleans counterparts. Yet even as the proportional resource allocation between New Orleans and the state remained flat, New Orleans significantly increased its performance relative to the state.

The gap is closing.

There is no experimental evidence to tell us whether or not the current New Orleans system is out-performing the old. But one can draw conclusions from city-state performance differentials over time. The post-Hurricane Katrina education system is closing the gap with the state at 4.5 times the rate of the previous system. Furthermore, the new system is closing this gap with a student body that has a higher percentage of free and reduced-price lunch students than the previous system – and that likely suffers from

Table 2: Per-Pupil Expenditures (2002, 2005, and 2009)

	2002	2005	2009
New Orleans Per-Pupil	\$6,571	\$7,603	\$13,040
State Per-Pupil	\$6,906	\$7,893	\$10,745
New Orleans RSD Charter School Per-Pupil	-	-	\$10,718

an increased rate of mental illness and post-traumatic shock.

Lastly, while the new system does have more resources than its predecessor, RSD charter school spending indicates that school-based expenditures have held constant over time in relation to state spending levels.

Are New Orleans charter schools outperforming traditional public schools?

For the past three years, the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) has conducted a quasi-experimental virtual twin study on New Orleans charter schools. The study compares raw score growth between individual charter schools and traditional public school averages over two testing intervals, and it controls for variables such as poverty, race, and special education.

After removing selective admission charter schools from the data set (in New Orleans the magnet schools from the previous system converted to charter schools), the results are presented in Table 3, with the charter sector divided in percentages based on effects sized in math and English language arts. In determining charter school placement across the spectrum, both subjects had to be either

positive or negative at the level stated – save for the middle category, which combines two outcomes:

- both subjects neutral
- one subject positive, one subject negative

Student Achievement Analysis

The three CREDO data-sets provide evidence for four major trends:

1. In every year, the percentage of charter schools out-performing the traditional system has been greater than the percentage of charter schools under-performing the traditional system.
2. The percentage of charter schools out-performing the traditional system has decreased every year – though the 2009-2011 data set has the highest percentage of charters achieving over a .1 effect size (24 percent).
3. The percentage of charter schools performing at the same level as the traditional system has increased every year.
4. The percentage of charters under-performing the traditional system has roughly held constant.

Table 3: Percentage of Charter Schools By Effect Size in Both Math and ELA

Year	-.2 or less	.19 to -.1	-.09 to -.01	One subject (-) and one neutral	Both neutral or one (+) and one (-)	One subject (+) and one neutral	+.01 to +.09	+.1 to +.19	+.2 or greater
2007-2009	7%	7%	2%	10%	19%	10%	26%	10%	10%
	(-) 26%	19%	(+) 56%						
2008-2010	2%	0%	6%	15%	28%	17%	2%	0%	6%
	(-) 23%	28%	(+) 49%						
2009-2011	7%	2%	4%	13%	35%	13%	2%	17%	7%
	(-) 26%	35%	(+) 39%						

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The charter sector continues to out-perform the traditional system, but there has been a shift in performance, with more charter schools moving from positive to neutral effect sizes.

There are two limitations of the CREDO analysis, however. First, during every year since Hurricane Katrina the charter market share has increased. The 2007-2009 data set is the purest New Orleans traditional schools vs. New Orleans charter schools comparison. As the set of traditional schools in New Orleans dwindled, an increasingly large share of the matching pool was drawn from across the state. In the 2009-2011 data set New Orleans charters served between 70 and 80 percent of New Orleans students. That set is more of a comparison of New Orleans charter schools versus schools across the state serving similar types of students, than it is a comparison between New Orleans charter schools and New Orleans traditional schools. This statewide virtual twin pool does not account for potential unobserved differences between New Orleans students and students across the state that might include differences in mental health of students that are not captured by special education status.

Additionally, due to lack of state testing coverage and the need for matched student growth over two years, the CREDO analysis does not account for student achievement gains occurring in kindergarten through third grade. By 2011, the fourth graders in many charter schools had entered these schools as kindergarteners, and any gains made in these years will not be captured by the CREDO effect sizes.

Given these drawbacks, few conclusions can be drawn from the changes in performance of charter schools over time. It is possible that:

- charter school performance is declining relative to traditional sector performance
- the changes in the virtual twin pool composition are driving declining effects
- unmeasured early elementary gains are leading to declines in measured effects

Further analysis of the virtual twin pool or the absolute attainment of charter school third graders may provide additional evidence, but current evidence tells us little as to why charter school effects have shown some decline.

The New Orleans Experience and Recommendations for Massachusetts

The current New Orleans public school system is outperforming the pre-Katrina system; the New Orleans charter sector is outperforming the traditional sector; and it is too soon to determine the effectiveness of the New Orleans voucher program. So what lessons should Massachusetts draw from the New Orleans experience?

The New Orleans results – coupled with both nationwide and Massachusetts specific research on charters and vouchers – provide evidence that Massachusetts should:

1. Significantly increase charter school market share in urban areas
2. Recruit effective non-urban charter operators from other states and refine the authorization process for non-urban charter schools

Recommendation #1: Increase charter school market share in urban areas

The New Orleans experience provides evidence that well-designed, urban charter markets can improve student achievement. Furthermore, the strong results of Boston

charter schools provide evidence that an urban charter school strategy can be replicated in Massachusetts. Policymakers would serve students well by allowing the expansion of charter schools across urban areas in Massachusetts.

Law and Policy

To facilitate the growth of the charter sector, Massachusetts should develop a state agency akin to Louisiana's RSD, which has been the regulatory vehicle for charter growth in New Orleans – and which has already been replicated in Tennessee and Michigan. Specifically, the RSD legislation should:

- Define the legal jurisdiction of the RSD as the bottom 5 percent of schools across the state, as defined by the state's accountability system.
- Enable the RSD to be a charter authorizer but require that the RSD use a third-party charter application reviewer to provide recommendations to the RSD superintendent (Louisiana and Tennessee contract with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers).
- Provide the RSD with facility control over any school it brings into its jurisdiction.
- Limit the RSD's charter school authorizer fee to 2 percent of the per-pupil – so that 98 percent of funds follow the child to the charter school.

By creating a RSD in Massachusetts, policy leaders can accelerate charter school growth. Additionally, given that many of Massachusetts poorest performing schools are in urban areas, the RSD can focus charter expansion in urban settings, where charters have proven to be most effective.

Leadership

RSD superintendents have a fundamentally different job than their traditional counterparts. Instead of directly managing a set of schools, a RSD superintendent's primary role is to facilitate the creation of an effective charter market. As such, great care must be taken to ensure that the RSD is led by a superintendent whose background and skills match the needs of the role. Ideal characteristics of a RSD superintendent would include the following:

- **Strategic Alignment:** Most superintendents attempt to improve student achievement by effectively operating schools within direct governmental control. A RSD leader's role is to develop a high-performing charter market. Care should be taken to select someone who is willing to relinquish power to educators rather than try to affect change through direct management of schools.
- **A Connector:** The RSD leader must be an ambassador for charter school growth. The RSD leader must recruit charter operators, human capital providers, and school service providers – all key ingredients in high-quality urban charter markets. Hiring a leader who has worked in an entrepreneurial educational reform organization can pay many dividends, as their professional networks will likely extend across many charter management organization and human capital partners.
- **Knowledge of Excellent Schools:** Lastly, a RSD leader should understand how excellent schools are run, either through experience operating a high-performing school or working for an institution that partnered closely with such schools. His or her internal bar must be set high. A leader who does not understand how great schools look, feel

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and perform will be at-risk of making flawed decisions. The RSD leader sets the bar for the new system. If that bar is low, it may cap the long-term performance of the system.

Securing the right leadership for a RSD will go far in ensuring that great charter schools are recruited to the state, that existing high-performing Massachusetts charter schools are cultivated to expand, and that under-performing charter schools are closed over time.

Implementation

High-quality, urban charter school markets are difficult to create and maintain. Even with the right policy and leadership, poor implementation can thwart effective charter growth. To nurture the development of a high-quality charter sector, policy makers and practitioners should:

- **Provide Incubation and Scaling Support:** A mature charter sector should include organizations with expertise in incubating and scaling charter schools. These organizations, such as Building Excellent Schools, New Schools Venture Fund, and Charter School Growth Fund, play a role similar to that of venture capitalists in the private sector: they fund and provide technical support to entrepreneurs. The lack of such supports will both increase the likelihood of failed new charter schools, as well as slow the growth of existing charter operators.
- **Make Human Capital a Priority:** The growth of the New Orleans charter market was in part fueled by the recruitment efforts of third-party human capital organizations. After Hurricane Katrina, Teach for America tripled its corps size and The New Teacher Project

was also contracted to recruit and certify teachers. In addition, many other human capital providers, such as New Leaders for New Schools, Leading Educators, and the Center for Transformative Teaching have all supported human capital development in the city. A vibrant human capital non-profit sector will go far in supporting an effective charter school sector. State leaders may wish to either fund these organizations directly or coordinate with philanthropists to ensure there is adequate funding for their growth.

- **Build Demand for High-Quality Charter Schools:** The expansion of high-quality charter schools, especially in states with strong unions, often receive significant political pushback. As such, cultivating both “grass-tops” elite political demand and “grassroots” parent and community demand should be a priority for educational leaders. Organizations such as 50 CAN, Stand for Children, the Urban League, the United Negro College Fund, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options can be engaged to build demand for high-quality charter growth.

Massachusetts can provide high-quality options for its students by increasing the number of high-quality urban charter schools. To facilitate this growth, policymakers would be well served by creating a statewide takeover entity with chartering authority; selecting an entrepreneurial leader as superintendent of this new entity; and then building a third party ecosystem to drive charter school growth, human capital recruitment and development, and charter school demand.

Recommendation #2: Recruit effective non-urban charter operators and refine

the authorization process for non-urban charter schools

The New Orleans experience provides no evidence – either positive or negative – on the effectiveness of non-urban charter schools. As such, charter success in New Orleans should not be used as evidence for the expansion of the non-urban charter sector. However, research on non-urban charter schools, both nationally and in Massachusetts, shows neutral to negative effects for non-urban charter schools.

Researchers in Massachusetts suggest the difference in performance between urban and non-urban charter is due to the fact that urban charter schools “serve larger shares of minority students in districts where the surrounding achievement level is generally low, keep their students in school longer, spend more money per-pupil, and are much more likely to identify with the “no excuses” instructional approach than are non-urban schools.”

This hypothesis leads to numerous other questions, including:

- Would the No Excuses inputs work in non-urban areas or are these strategies best suited for students with low absolute achievement levels?
- Do the strategies employed by the founders of non-urban charter schools reflect a more global philosophical difference in educational approach than the founders of urban charter schools – especially with regards to the importance of state administered test score results?
- Are there unobserved differences in human capital inputs between non-urban and urban charter school founders?

Ultimately, we simply do not know as much about what works in charter schools in non-

urban settings. As such, Massachusetts should focus in on recruiting high-performing non-urban charter operators from out of state as well as refining its authorization process for non-urban charter schools.

Law and Policy

Massachusetts should consider using state funds to support further research on non-urban charter schools, research that could be both of service to Massachusetts students as well as the nation as a whole. Certain charter networks such as Great Hearts and BASIS have shown strong results in non-urban settings and further analysis of these models could guide policy leaders in Massachusetts – and eventually lead to the greater expansion of high-quality charter school growth in non-urban areas.

Leadership

Given the dearth of effective, local, and non-urban charter operators in Massachusetts, state leaders should actively recruit high-performing non-urban charter schools from other states. Massachusetts’ high-pupil expenditures could make it an attractive state for the national expansion of operators. Having these operators in-state will accelerate the development of the non-urban charter sector base by providing tangible models of how to serve non-urban populations.

Implementation

Given the low-performance of non-urban charters schools, Massachusetts – as well as other states – may be acquiring evidence on what does not work in non-urban settings. As such, authorizers should be reviewing the performance of past applicants and narrowing their approval rates of future applications with similar models. Ideally, this refinement of the authorization process would be in conjunction with state-sponsored research on the issue.

About the Authors:

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Endnotes

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