

**United States Senate
Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development
July 14, 2006 Hearing
New Orleans, LA**

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Overview:

Elsewhere in the country, when a state or city “takes over” a failing school district, they really take over the governance, by changing the school board and/or controlling the superintendency. The new governing authority inherits the existing central office, the existing policies and procedures and the historical culture of the district. These efforts to reform the “system” have met with some limited success, but have not transformed the academic performance of a low-performing district.

In New Orleans, the state’s takeover is the reverse of other efforts nationally. The local school board and its superintendent were left intact, and the board retained the right to run 16 schools and remains the taxing and bonding authority for all public schools in Orleans Parish. The state, in essence, took over empty school buildings, the right to operate the schools, and the money (local, state and federal) to educate the students attending state controlled schools. The state did not take over the central office; it did not retain existing employees, it did not inherit existing policies and procedures.

A New Model for Urban Education:

As the state reopens schools, it is doing so in a new framework. The state board of education (BESE) has approved an operational plan for the Recovery School District (RSD) that outlines the principles and goals of the RSD and how the RSD will operate its own schools and work with schools it charters.

The Bottom Line: New Orleans now has the most free market public education system in the country. The challenge for the RSD is to find the right balance between the free market and the need for systemization of some areas of operation.

Public School Choice:

Parents can choose to send their child to any school in the RSD, space allowing. The RSD operated and chartered schools are open to any student, and none of the schools have attendance zones. If demand exceeds supply, the school must hold a lottery. Schools are also required to provide transportation for any student who lives more than one mile from school.

Equity of School Finance:

Whether RSD operated or RSD chartered, the money will follow the student. BESE has adopted a school financing formula that provides one funding amount for a regular education student and

different funding for students with special needs. Schools will only be funded for the students they educate.

Strong and Transparent Accountability:

All RSD schools are subject to Louisiana's school accountability system, which was ranked number one in the country by *Education Week*. Every summer, the state will release the performance scores for all RSD schools, so parents can exercise informed choice.

BESE has established the 2006-07 school year as the baseline year. Charter schools must meet certain growth requirements by the end of year three, or their charter is revoked. They must meet additional growth requirements by the end of year five, or their charter is not renewed.

Competition for Employees:

A majority of schools in the RSD and in the city will be charter schools. Each charter school can establish their own pay and benefit structure and is not subject to a collective bargaining agreement or the state's tenure law.

BESE has adopted a salary schedule for all RSD operated schools, and the RSD operated schools must provide tenure.

Competition in non-academic services:

BESE is requiring all RSD schools to use the same Student Information System and IT platform. Otherwise, schools will be able to purchase services from a shared service center operated by the state, or from other vendors. This structure requires that the RSD build quality support services that schools value, or schools can purchase services elsewhere. Some of these services include transportation, food service and building maintenance

School Focus:

The RSD began operations with no central office staff. It will be operating schools with a minimal central office, allowing resources to be spent at the school site.

RSD chartered schools have control over their time, people and money. The plan adopted by BESE recognizes the autonomy of the charter schools. The funding formula passes 98.4% of the per-pupil funding directly to the charter school.

The RSD operated schools are being managed in a more traditional manner, although the state is allowing principals to select and manage their staffs.

Curriculum and Instruction:

New Orleans has a tradition of highly mobile students. While a family can move and attend the same school (there are no attendance zones), the RSD is working to balance the autonomy of charters with the need for some continuity among schools.

All but one school in the RSD will be using Louisiana's Comprehensive Curriculum. All schools will participate in tests based on Louisiana's Grade Level Expectations, which will require that schools cover the same content in each grade. The professional development provided to RSD operated schools will also be offered to RSD chartered schools.

Other policies adopted by BESE:

Special Education: All charters must have 10% special needs students.

Expulsion: The state will conduct all expulsion hearings for RSD schools.

Alternative Schools: The RSD will be operating 2-3 alternative schools to serve students city-wide.

Short-term Challenges:

- Need to “camouflage” the complexity of the governance model
 - One place for parents to get information on schools, register, file complaints, etc.
- Need for a clearinghouse for Community Involvement
 - Anyone wishing to interact with the charter schools has no place to go. This includes donors, business partners, volunteers, social service agencies, etc.
- Educating the Public:
 - Everyone is accustomed to a top-down model for public education. They are used to going to the board and/or the superintendent to get a decision made affecting all schools. With the majority of schools in the parish now chartered, New Orleans has a decentralized decision-making structure.

Unintended Consequences (positive):

- More civic engagement:
Sectors of the community that long ago abandoned public education are now serving as charter board members and engaging in public education.
- No more circus-like board meetings:
The OPSB board meetings were destructive and prevented civil discourse. Now, with the lack of one central authority, the obstructionists cannot gain a foothold. While charter board meetings are subject to the open meetings law, they are not televised, there are too many meetings to monitor, and truly interested parties now participate, preventing the obstructionists from gaining control.
- This structure was the only way to terminate OPSB central office employees, eliminate the collective bargaining agreement and leverage the opportunity to start anew.