

School Turnaround in New Orleans

The Recovery School District (RSD) is a special statewide school district administered by the Louisiana Department of Education. The RSD was created by legislation passed in 2003 (S.B. 225), and it is designed to take underperforming schools and transform them into successful places for children to learn.

Failing schools assigned to the RSD are reopened as either traditional schools under the direct control of the Recovery School District or charter schools under the administration of non-profit organizations. Schools must remain in the Recovery School District for a minimum of five years. After that time period and once they have improved their instructional practices and met state performance expectations, the schools are returned to the jurisdiction of their local districts.

Before Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) was operating 128 schools but enrolled only 63,000 students, leaving many of those schools half-empty. As for student performance, OPSB ranked 67th out of the state's 68 districts. Although Louisiana has a national reputation for the quality of its school accountability system, it ranked 45th among the states on student achievement. The immediate impact of Katrina was to devastate an already troubled district. Fifty-five schools were completely destroyed, and the rest suffered about \$1 billion in damages, as well as an additional \$90 million in theft, vandalism, and other costs not covered by federal relief programs. Most schools closed, and their students dispersed. A legislative amendment to the state's definition of "failing" schools in 2005 allowed the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to take over all of New Orleans schools that had performed below the state average for three or more years. BESE amended its rules to permit the takeover not only of failing schools, but also failing districts. The Orleans Parish School Board retained control over 17 schools, and the RSD assumed control over the remaining schools (Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Recovery School District had already taken over 5 New Orleans schools).

Currently, 68 schools are open in the Recovery School District. Until the 2008-2009 school year, the oversight of the RSD was limited to schools in the New Orleans area. In July 2008, four schools in East Baton Rouge Parish and one school in Pointe Coupee were placed into the RSD. In July 2009, eight more schools in East Baton Rouge Parish and two schools in Caddo Parish will be transferred to the jurisdiction of the RSD.

Under strong leadership from state Superintendent Paul Pastorek and RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas, the RSD has implemented a variety of strategies for improvement. Pastorek and Vallas assumed their roles in the spring of 2007 and quickly intensified efforts to turn around the failing New Orleans schools. They began by laying out a "portfolio" approach for the RSD that combines top-down state control with decentralized school operation under charter school boards, seeing school reform as an opportunity to leverage the charter school model and build upon collaborations with the business and non-profit communities. Principals are provided flexibility to foster the development of rigorous curricula, high quality instruction and expectations for all students, and professional learning communities. With help from the federal RENEWAAL legislation (Renewing Education through Attracting America's Leaders), the RSD has hired more than 600 teachers, and the city has been a priority for groups like New Schools for New Orleans, Teach for America, and the New Teacher Project. These organizations have laid a strong groundwork of partnership and collaboration throughout the city. Working with the New Teacher Project and the Recovery School District, New Schools for New Orleans has developed the teacher

recruitment program TeachNOLA. In 2008, 80 percent of schools in the Recovery School District had a Teach for America corps member, a 37 percent increase from 2007.¹

The challenges for the RSD have run the gamut, from trying to ensure sufficient teachers, to providing seating and food for students. By early 2007, though, things began to change for the better and have improved rapidly since then. Student registrations have skyrocketed, with the district adding as many as 75 students per day. By the 2007-08 school year, capacity had increased by 10,000 seats, creating enough room for every student who wanted to enroll. Graduation rates also increased between 2007-08. Under Vallas' tenure as Superintendent of the RSD, new career-themed academies have been opened, after school and summer programs have been instituted, technology has been upgraded and integrated into classroom practice, and the school day and school year have been lengthened (8:00am to 4:30pm and 76,170 total instructional minutes for the 2008-2009 school year compared to the state's requirement of 63,720 instructional minutes).

Although the RSD has seen test score gains and other indicators of progress in grades K-8, high schools are improving more slowly. The RSD undertook an extensive High School Redesign initiative in 2008 to meet this challenge. RSD direct-run high schools have adopted a five-block schedule that incorporates such elements as credit recovery programs; Read 180 and Carnegie Bridge to Algebra interventions; double blocks of English and math in freshman and sophomore years; and work study, internship, and dual enrollment opportunities for upperclassman.

Securing adequate funding remains an ongoing challenge, with enormous amounts of construction and projects still underway. Civic, community, and business leaders have played vital roles in New Orleans' school turnaround efforts, serving on charter school boards, funding new leader recruitment and school renovation efforts, mentoring students in career preparation programs, and providing internship programs for students. With the help of a \$6.37 million grant from the Walton Family Foundation and additional funding from the Carnegie Corporation, the Recovery School District began to transform six high schools into career-focused academies as part of its redesign efforts in 2008. Many schools have also partnered with local institutions of higher education to set-up dual enrollment programs so that students can earn both high school and college credit while enrolled in high school.

Additional efforts to engage businesses and the community in school reform continue. The Public Education Progress Committee, which was formed in early 2008, for example, brings together civic, community, and business leaders to facilitate communication and collaboration between the Recovery School District, the Orleans Parish School Board, Charter School operators, and other community stakeholders.

One high school that has been making progress under the new academy system is Walter L. Cohen High School, which we will visit on this trip. Alfred Jones took over as Principal of Walter L. Cohen High school in 2008 when it was selected to participate in RSD's new academy initiative. The Academy of Health Sciences at Walter L. Cohen High School opened its doors in August 2008 with a 9th grade class of 141 students. As the academy focus is phased-in over the next three years, Cohen will become an entirely health sciences-focused school, with the academy encompassing all grades. Students interested in health sciences in Orleans Parish may elect to attend Cohen. Over time, students will have opportunities to shadow medical staff, visit various health facilities, participate in paid internships, and receive

¹ For more information about Teach for America in the Greater New Orleans region, please visit http://www.teachforamerica.org/corps/placement_regions/greater_new_orleans/greater_new_orleans.htm, retrieved April 20, 2009.

guidance from a mentor in a health services profession. Students will have opportunities to graduate with certification and endorsements in Pre-Medicine, Nursing, Sports Medicine, Nutrition or First Response/EMS fields.² This year, a group of students is participating in a “Start on Success” (S.O.S.) job-training program through a partnership with Touro Infirmary. Coordinated by the Touro Volunteer Services, students 16 to 18 years old spend two hours a day Mondays through Thursdays as paid interns in Touro’s dietary services, materials management, housekeeping, human resources, or information departments.³

Looking forward, Pastorek and Vallas hope to see more charter schools open in the RSD and will continue to work to elevate the level of instruction and achievement in New Orleans schools, enhancing education and career opportunities for students. As the RSD expands its oversight to schools in Baton Rouge and districts throughout the state, it will continue to raise expectations for school performance, apply lessons learned from working with New Orleans schools, and continue to upgrade and evolve its approaches.

² For more information on the Academy of Health Sciences programs and activities, please see <http://cohenhs.org/Files/magazine09.pdf>, retrieved April 20, 2009.

³ For more information on the “Start on Success” program at Walter L. Cohen High School, please see <http://nola.live.advance.net/picayunes/t-p/nopicayunes/index.ssf?/base/news-7/1236835330293840.xml&coll=1>, retrieved April 20, 2009.