

## After Katrina – Rebuilding New Orleans Schools: Lessons for Washington State

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### Key Findings

1. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, the state placed most of the city's schools into its Recovery School District.
2. "If we believe certain kids can't learn, we will deny those children a chance at achieving greatness."
3. Charter schools are public schools with open admissions, using a lottery if there is more demand than available space.
4. Since 2007, the percentage of New Orleans students in the Recovery School District performing at grade level has more than doubled.

On February 1, 2012, Washington Policy Center held its annual education lunch event in downtown Seattle. Over 200 public officials, education reformers, business people, teachers and community leaders attended the lunch.

The keynote speaker was Mr. Paul Pastorek, former State Superintendent of Education in Louisiana. In 2003, he created a state-level school district for failing schools, the Recovery School District. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in August 2005, the state placed most of the city's schools into the Recovery School District. The subsequent reforms have been so successful that Mr. Pastorek has been called "a 'giant' of the reform movement."<sup>1</sup>

In his remarks, he explained why education reform is so urgently needed: "The school system is so outdated, outmoded and dysfunctional, good people can't help but be unsuccessful. The system is broken, and one of these days people around this country are going to recognize that."

He described the unique model of schooling he championed in Louisiana, which is based on four core principles:

- Allowing top school principals to set their own budget and education strategy
- Allowing teachers to teach
- Allowing parents to choose the school that is best for their children
- Allowing community members to form boards to oversee these schools

He said his ultimate goal is to put responsibility where it belongs, with principals and teachers, and to give every child an opportunity to learn and achieve.

Mr. Pastorek began by explaining that our children are more capable of learning than we give them credit for. He believes every child can learn, so failure should never be an acceptable outcome. His view of reform began when he realized that if we believe certain kids can't learn, we will deny those children a chance at achieving greatness. Thus he focused his efforts on removing barriers to student success.

In his speech, he explained that in order for change to happen, adult failure must not be tolerated at any level. He said that when we unleash the potential of adults to help children, it is possible for great change to occur. If we can design a system that rewards high-quality principals and teachers, they then become the drivers of solutions which directly benefit the children. This is the basic philosophy behind his reformation of the New Orleans school system.

<sup>1</sup> "State schools Superintendent Paul Pastorek says, 'Time for me to go'," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 10, 2011.

Mr. Pastorek's plan to reform the existing system was highly strategic. The model he created is called the Recovery School District, a new state-level school district run by the Louisiana Superintendent of Education. He explained that the Recovery School District gives individual school principals the complete responsibility for change and improvement, as well as for failure.

He said that the school district works by authorizing a high-quality operator of a school to set specific outcome-based goals and objectives for the school to achieve. The district monitors (but does not manage) the day-to-day operations, and determines whether or not officials are achieving these goals and objectives. He emphasized the district does not dictate curriculum content or pace, subject matter, extracurricular activities, or the manner in which principals run their schools.

Each school must meet academic targets at three- and five-year reviews or face termination of its charter. Successful leaders are rewarded with more schools, while unsuccessful leaders are removed from the system. Unlike principals in typical school districts, who are given no resources to manage, and must comply with commands and mandates issued from a distant central office, Mr. Pastorek's goal is to empower school principals to determine the destiny of their own schools. "What this system reform is about is putting responsibility where it belongs, on the principal, making it clear and unambiguous who is in charge and who is responsible, and giving them the power to make a difference," he explained.

Louisiana law defines the criteria for transferring a school into the Recovery School District. Any school in which at least 50% of students do not meet grade-level expectations for four consecutive years is eligible for placement in the RSD. The district may choose to operate the school itself by hiring a principal and staff, or run it as a charter public school with a local board.

Each charter public school is run by a non-profit organization, but is funded in the same way and with the same resources as every other public school in the community. Charter schools are thus public schools, with open admissions and a lottery if there is more demand than available space.

### **Mr. Pastorek's Strategic Intent of a Recovery School District:**

- Create a competitive environment
- Empower school leaders and build a team of effective teachers
- Give principals responsibility for outcomes in schools and flexibility to make decisions around human capital, financial capital and education strategy
- Remove barriers to success
- Hold school leaders and their teams rigorously accountable
- Take the school board out of the business of micromanaging a central office and schools by decentralizing command and control
- Increase community engagement

He explained that while there are many challenges and criticisms of the program, the RSD shows great promise for turning around chronically low-achieving schools. The outcomes are encouraging, as no other school district in Louisiana has seen as much improvement as has the RSD. He noted that since 2007, the percentage of New Orleans students in the RSD performing at grade level has more than doubled. "When you design a system that rewards high quality, you get the results you designed for," he stated.

Before Katrina, the New Orleans school district was one of the lowest performing districts in the country. Since Pastorek's reforms, however, students in

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the Recovery School District have outperformed students throughout the state as well as students in other non-RSD New Orleans schools. Further, the district is no longer one of the worst performers in Louisiana or even in the nation.

- Schools in Louisiana's Recovery School District have ranked number one in student progress since 2007
- New Orleans' African-American students score better today than African-American students in the rest of the state
- Five years ago, 23% of children scored at or above "basic" on state tests; now 48% do
- Before Katrina, 62% attended failing schools; less than 20% do so today

"What we're doing is in the best interest of the children, and we've got a children-first focus in our approach." However, Mr. Pastorek conceded that even though great improvements have been made, the majority of students are still not at grade level. He explained the system has encountered a number of challenges, including:

- No precedent or proven model to follow – this is a huge experiment
- Decentralization which makes it difficult to maintain quality and compliance
- Confusion within families and the community who are used to a centralized school district
- High transportation costs due to open enrollment
- Difficulty of shutting down and transforming schools

As with any reform program, he explained "there is tremendous scrutiny being applied to what we're doing." Fortunately, parent satisfaction has gone up dramatically – 89% of parents report satisfaction with the current enrollment process – along with increased community support for the school system.

Mr. Pastorek concluded his speech by emphasizing his belief that every child can learn, that failure for children is not an option, and that adult failure should not be tolerated. The Recovery School District is evidence that these beliefs can be successfully put into practice.

He believes the Recovery School District should be a model for how schools can and should be operated: "What is the strategic intent of the RSD? It is to foster the creation of a competitive environment. Schools compete for kids. Kids are king in the RSD. Not the adults."

Mr. Pastorek urged Washington state to "explore what we've done, test what we've done; see if I'm just making this up or if it's real. If you don't believe it, just go to New Orleans and see it."

*For more information, see Paul Pastorek's column, "In Katrina's wake, New Orleans' schools reinvent themselves around competition," printed in The Seattle Times on February 1, 2012.*