

Louisiana Recovery School District... 2006 Offering Change, Choice and Hope

The Landscape of Failure.

In 1998, the year before Louisiana's nationally recognized *School Accountability System* was fully put in place, the state required school systems to publicly report *School Performance Scores* for the bottom 20% of schools. Why? Because even as the *School Accountability System* was gearing up to go statewide, it was clear immediate action was needed from local school boards to address problems with the state's lowest performing schools.

Unfortunately, since that time, many of these same *Academically Unacceptable* schools have changed little. All of them are high-poverty schools where a majority of students come from low-income conditions. The majority of these chronically failed schools are in New Orleans—though there are pockets of them in many other places.

While it is a significant achievement for Louisiana that the *total* number of K-12 low-performing schools has fallen (from 632 to 522), 170 of these remain dismally low in academic outcomes for the state's at-risk students. Some of these schools are actually "in decline" with scores dropping. The current 170 failing schools labeled *Academically Unacceptable* are scattered across rural parishes and inner cities—with 40% in Orleans Parish alone. The other large urban districts—Jefferson, East Baton Rouge and Caddo—have 7%, 12%, and 11% respectively.

See page 4 for the listing of the state's largest districts and number of low-performing schools.

Poverty Presents Challenges... Local Districts May Lack Know-how or Leadership.

There are a number and variety of reasons why Louisiana still has many chronically low-performing schools:

- Students from poverty backgrounds, for a variety of reasons, enter school well behind peers and present significant challenges to schools.
- Local school boards may be slow to respond or simply have not adopted data and research-driven strategies that yield results. Districts may resist innovation or independent models. Resources may not be redirected to these schools.
- Districts often do not recruit, train and/or assign principals with school "turn-around" expertise, nor do they offer incentives.

- Teachers assigned to these schools are often inexperienced, lack content skills or training.
- Faculty accountability is not based on student performance, nor are there pay incentives.
- Parents are often unengaged and/or lack the educational skills to help their own children.
- Students drop out of failing high schools at alarmingly high rates.

Slow Change in Failing Schools and Crisis in Orleans Lead to Bold Expansion of Accountability System.

State level efforts, while driving significant change, can only go so far. Ultimate responsibility for learning lies with local school districts, elected boards and parents. But what more "accountability" can be demanded of local districts that do not change their paradigms?

This is a question faced by many states, but in 2003 the problem became acute for Louisiana. An overwhelming number of failing schools were concentrated in Orleans Parish—the largest district with nearly 65,000 students. This represented 80% of the district's total schools—86 out of 107. About 65% of all schools in Orleans were not reaching state growth targets or not improving at all, while another 15% were declining further. Financial conditions were getting worse. The school board was either unwilling or unable to address the issues. The superintendent post looked like a revolving door.



"While some home factors cannot be entirely overcome by schools, there are many proven instructional practices, whole-school models and school board policies which can improve achievement. Kids needn't be in schools at extreme levels of low achievement."

“Orleans has been labeled one of the worst urban school systems in the nation by *Education Week* and others. It was also highly politicized: the “who you know” not the “what you know” syndrome was the norm.”

For Louisiana, the answer was the creation of the **Louisiana Recovery School District** (RSD) in 2003. A key BESE official, the state superintendent, two key legislators and CABL collaborated in designing and supporting a groundbreaking constitutional amendment—overwhelmingly approved by voters. It allowed BESE to assume authority over any Academically Unacceptable school that did not improve after several years of “improvement plans.”

BESE governs RSD schools and receives all state, federal and local funds. It can operate them through the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) or contract them as Type V charter schools with other entities such as colleges, charter organizations, nonprofit and for-profit providers. RSD schools have tremendous flexibility. They choose their faculty, they don’t have to enter collective bargaining contracts and there is no tenure with the RSD.

No Illusions.

The RSD presents numerous opportunities for certain individual schools, but it was not designed to solve the fundamental problems of ***catastrophically ineffective school systems***. By 2004, conditions in Orleans had gotten worse. That prompted the Legislature to give BESE the authority to declare any school district in Academic Crisis if it had more than half its students in failing schools. This declaration transfers all policy and managerial authority from the local school board to its superintendent, in the hope of limiting political interference. Financial audits are required with state oversight. This action was aimed at the crisis in New Orleans, but could apply to any school district that meets the criteria (i.e. St. Helena).

The LDOE soon got a clear picture of the near financial collapse and fraud in the Orleans system. At about the same time, the talented but politically besieged, local superintendent resigned. The state sent in one of the best “turn-around” financial management firms in the nation to take over responsibilities. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) had threatened to pull federal funds from Louisiana unless it intervened in this unprecedented way.

Though the RSD offered a great mechanism for dealing with academically failing schools there was another challenge—the shortage of entities in New Orleans or elsewhere in Louisiana to actually operate these schools. In response, a key BESE official and CABL began looking at ways from inside and outside of Louisiana to increase capacity for RSD schools. In addition, the USDOE put up \$4 million to support fledgling RSD and other charter schools (www.educationventurefund.org).

RSD Moves Forward.

The first RSD school opened in the fall of 2004 when the University of New Orleans started operating Capdau. Parental and business support exceeded all expectations and LEAP tests for the first year showed gains.

For 2005-06, five more RSD schools, all in New Orleans, were chartered with universities, independent community groups and innovative nonprofit providers such as KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program). This was exciting news, but the process to award this second round of RSD charters further highlighted the need for even more capacity. Dozens of schools would soon be eligible to operate under the RSD, but by whom? CABL, through a grant from Greater New Orleans Foundation, supported efforts to expand local and national interest in operating these schools.

Katrina Disaster Collapses School System. RSD Offers Solution.

Then came August 29, 2005 and the devastation and mass evacuation that closed the school system in Orleans. The conditions and consequences were monumental in scale. Given the severe problems before the storm, it quickly became obvious that emergency intervention by the state would be needed.

In an emergency session of the Legislature in November 2005, CABL, the state Superintendent of Education, BESE, LABI and key lawmakers collaborated on a law to put all of New Orleans’ 102 low-performing schools into the state RSD for the next five years. The near-unanimous support in the Legislature indicated statewide endorsement of radical change, for children in New Orleans schools.

That action left about a dozen schools opened under the school board. A group of parents, educators and citizens from an area that did not sustain heavy damages, quickly formed a charter school organization. Six Algiers Charter Association schools were re-opened by the 2006 spring semester.

Meanwhile, the LDOE created a special state RSD team. Under difficult conditions, this team eventually opened and operated a handful of schools for the spring term and opened additional schools under previously granted RSD charters, such as Capdau.

If schools were to reopen in a manner consistent with repopulation, and more importantly, reopen as much improved places of learning, then something vastly different had to happen.



Going forward, the RSD faced overarching large-scale challenges that continue today:

- Negotiating with FEMA.
- Repairing and improving facilities and technology—many in deplorable condition before Katrina.
- Informing parents and enrolling students.
- Putting good faculty and instructional practices into place.
- And, predicting where students will return in 2006 and how many.

A New Day...A New Way.

It is certainly a monumental effort necessary to open damaged schools and get thousands of children enrolled by September in a large-scale post-disaster environment. The RSD is working hand-in-hand with the New Orleans School Board and all charter schools to enroll students based on parents' choices, school capacity and population density.

As of the date of this briefing, plans are to open 53 schools in New Orleans for the 2006-07 school year. That is enough to accommodate as many as 34,000 students—though some demographers are estimating only 28,000 students will enroll, so not all 53 schools may be needed. For the first time, parents will have choices. The “breaking-up” of the old system has led to new charter groups and increased citizen involvement. Competition has emerged in attracting students to certain schools. The plans look like this:

- 34 schools in the state RSD (16 operated directly by the RSD, 12 independent charters, and 6 Algiers charters).
- 17 schools under the New Orleans School Board (5 operated directly by the school board, 2 Algiers charters, and 10 independent charters).
- 2 independent schools previously chartered under BESE.

While enrollment, logistics, security, repairs and other issues present on-going challenges, one thing is certain: the educational plan for the RSD schools represents a significant change from business as usual. It includes policies not seen previously in New Orleans, and perhaps, not before in the state.



Centered on Children and Academic Results.

After careful review of the educational plan for RSD schools, it is obvious that policies and processes are based on creating the best possible learning environment and practices for students—even taking into account the unstable aspects of these children's lives.

Locating and hiring faculty is an ongoing challenge, given that many educators are dislocated and housing remains a serious problem. Despite shortages, **hiring practices are rigorous**, whether applicants previously worked in the system or not. It includes applications, skills testing and interviews. High-tech and multiple recruiting strategies are being employed—including collaborations with the New Teacher Project, Teach for America and independent charter organizations. The RSD is arranging for temporary housing in some cases and pay schedules are higher to attract more qualified individuals.

A strong process is being used to hire principals, as well, and these new principals participate in teacher selections. A national group has been engaged to recruit successful retired urban principals. RSD officials hope to create a pool of potential school leaders and are conducting school leadership training by regional and national experts.

The RSD plan also **embraces innovation and research-based best practices**—especially for children who are already behind in their cognitive and academic skills or were previously exposed to poor schooling. Early childhood programs (4-year-olds) are being added.

The RSD will measure its success **based on student academic gains** and remain in the Louisiana School Accountability System. In addition, the RSD system will provide student **performance-based faculty** rewards, professional development and removal if there is no improvement. Excessive absenteeism, no-shows at training sessions and distractions will no longer be the norm.

Also, RSD schools include specific **efforts involving parents** and it has ongoing collaborations with community and business groups and the New Orleans School Board. In addition, several school-based health clinics have been established with comprehensive services.

LDOE and the RSD continue to actively recruit independent charter groups. RSD policy specifically supports the **autonomy of charter-based school models** that have been selected. All these schools must adhere to state School Accountability System requirements and meet academic goals.

A unique support and professional services nonprofit center has been created, with the help of the local business community and with initial support from CABL and the LDOE. **New Schools for New Orleans [NSNO]** serves all RSD and charter schools in the city for various contracts, purchases, professional services, etc., that otherwise would be too costly for a single school. NSNO has already raised more than \$1million in private funds for start-up and initial operations of the center. This represents a strong signal of business and citizen support for this “new day” in education.

Parental and Business Support Crucial To Success.

All indications are that parents who had kids in RSD schools last spring were pleased with the changes. Some people may be disappointed that not every previously operating school can be reopened due to lack of population and facility damages.

Unfortunately, there is the steady complaint from those who would go back to the status quo or perhaps simply want to retain certain controls or power. Others may decry that the city now has “dual” education systems. Prior to Katrina however, parents with resources sent their kids to many long-established parochial and private schools, in effect, a dual system. In any case, having a single system of public schools in a large district does not correlate in any way with having *good* public schools.

Strong voices of support from New Orleans political, business, parental, neighborhood and educational leaders are needed if these schools are to be given a chance to succeed. The post-Katrina law governing the RSD in New Orleans requires that the schools remain there for five years, at which time a determination will be made on whether they may be returned to the Orleans School Board. What type of school board, governing model or leadership will people want and demand to take these schools back? There is acknowledgement in New Orleans that this is a critical question for the community to answer over the next few years.

For the rest of Louisiana, policymakers, business leaders and advocates of reform should demand that successful practices and independent charter models at work in the RSD be replicated in other districts with failing schools, well before a “state takeover” becomes necessary. This is not a distant or theoretical concern. The state’s three other largest urban districts contain the majority of the remaining failing schools: East Baton Rouge, Caddo

and Jefferson. Added to that fact is that many thousands of previous Orleans students, some 2-3 grade levels behind, are now enrolled in these urban districts and many other poor, rural parishes, as well.

Local Advocates for Change Needed in Many Communities

One of the most critical threats to educational progress in Louisiana is the lack of local accountability, citizen-led reform groups, and strong political leadership for better schools—especially for inner cities and rural poverty areas. State reform policies are solid, with many ranked high nationally, but real change happens at the school. Local district programs, policies, and practices should drive and support school-based change. Does your community have an independent citizen or business group actively engaged in the effectiveness of your school district? Supporting innovation and data-driven changes?

Insisting on accountability during elections or in evaluating a superintendent?

Some now working at one level or another include: Pointe Coupee Action for Change in Education-PACE; Advance Baton Rouge; Lafayette Chamber of Commerce; Alliance for Public Education (Shreveport, NWLA); Baton Rouge Area Chamber for Commerce; Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, BGR and CBNO-MAC (New Orleans); and there may be others. But, as the chart below indicates, there are low-performing schools in most districts and room for improvement everywhere. A higher level of local citizen engagement is needed in the next several years if Louisiana is to see sustained gains in academic achievement for its children.

CABL will continue to monitor and actively participate in the public policy directions for the RSD and the many other major education issues that are of critical importance to our state.

Louisiana’s Low-Performing Schools...Where Are They? 2004-05 School Performance Scores and Labels*

Largest School Districts	Academically			% of District’s Total Schools
	Unacceptable	1Star Low	Total	
Orleans	54	32	86	80%
East Baton Rouge	21	35	56	69
Jefferson (Metairie, Kenner)	12	28	40	40
Caddo (Shreveport)	18	20	38	57
St. Tammany (suburban)	0	0	0	0
Calcasieu (Lake Charles)	3	8	11	19
Lafayette	2	3	5	13
Rapides (Alexandria)	4	11	15	30
Livingston (suburban)	0	0	0	0
Bossier (suburban)	0	6	6	21
Terrebonne (Thibodaux)	0	12	12	33
Tangipahoa (Hammond)	3	11	14	40
Ouachita (West Monroe, suburban)	1	2	3	9
Ascension	1	3	4	19
City of Monroe	4	8	12	63
Iberia	2	9	11	37%

The remaining 30% of low-performing schools are scattered among several parishes across the state, including many in poor, rural parishes.

*0-200 SPS Index: Academically Unacceptable < 60, 1 star = 45-59, 2 star = 60-79, 3 star =100-119, 4 star =120-139, and 5 star >140. State average = 87.3