

## Ensuring Equity & Excellence: A response to the BGR/Cowen report on school governance

By Rev. Torin T. Sanders, Ph.D. / *New Orleans Agenda* / Contributing Writer

NEW ORLEANS (5/24/10) - As a former president of the Orleans Parish School Board, a current parent of a child enrolled in public school, and a long-time advocate for quality education, I read with great interest the recently released report on governance co-authored by BGR/Cowen.

In part one of this response, I will offer some observations about the report. In part two, I will offer an alternative recommendation for future public school governance in New Orleans. The observations and recommendation offered are based on extensive research on school governance and analysis of successful school districts around the country. Additionally, the author has been directly involved in the education system as a school social worker, a school board member, and an education advocate.

### Part I:

Observations about the report fall into three categories. They are:

- 1. *The issue of innovation in education.***
- 2. *The report's lack of objectivity***
- 3. *Virtually all of the governance models highlighted increase rather than decrease the educational bureaucracy and raise greater questions with regard to accountability to the public.***

The first observation relates to the issue of innovation. The title of the BGR/Cowen report is *Managing Innovation*. Surely, innovation is a worthwhile and desirable end; innovation is a value. But innovation, to the extent it has occurred, has come with a price paid by our city's students. We must also value and be concerned with other mandates.

Innovation, for example, has come at the expense of accountability. Due to the loose nature of our "system," no one is responsible to ensure all children are successfully admitted to a school without hassle and anxiety. No one is responsible for the children who are "pushed-out" due to undesirable behaviors. A recent report entitled "Pushed Out: Harsh discipline in Louisiana schools denies the right to education" (Sullivan & Morgan, 2010) revealed that the suspension rate in RSD schools is four times the national rate. Expulsions occur in the RSD at ten times the national rate. Furthermore, no one is responsible or accountable for ensuring that the scores of children with special needs have their needs met. Numerous media reports have highlighted concerns with the way in which children with special needs are distributed throughout our city's schools. The patterns present among several schools are highly suggestive of discriminatory practices and outright violations of federal laws.

Innovation has come at the expense of equity. A review of average expenditures per pupil for 2007- 2008 reveal that RSD-run schools spent \$20,770 per pupil, while OPSB charters spent \$9,671 per pupil (Cowen, 2010). A review of the distribution of experienced versus less experienced teachers shows that for OPSB-run schools 62% of the teachers have over 20 years, in OPSB charters 27% of the teachers have over 20 years. In RSD-charters, only 10% of the teachers have over 20 years whereas 32% of the teachers have less than 1 year of experience (Cowen, 2010). What is important to note is that RSD leadership has consistently stated that they are attempting to educate children who are lagging educationally. Clearly, these students deserve more teachers with more experience. A recent issue brief released by the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) examines this issue in great detail ([www.utno.org](http://www.utno.org)).

Innovation has come at the expense of public money. In the 2007-2008 school year, New Orleans charters alone spent a total of \$6.3 million dollars on transportation. This figure does not include the dozens of direct-run schools. Not only are students being transported across the city, but schools have also been reluctant to work together to produce more efficient bus routes that would save time and money. Also well known is the massive waste on money for security costs in RSD schools. In the 2006-2007 school year, for example, RSD spent an average of

\$2,100 per student.

Moreover, we now have duplicative educational entities in New Orleans. For example, the Orleans Parish School Board provides special education services. The Recovery School District must provide such services. And there is also the SUNS organization, which attempts to meet the needs of charters. Lastly, there is the issue of salaries. While everyone wants to attract and retain the best talent, the loose nature of our educational landscape makes it difficult to monitor whether salaries paid to high-level staff (principals, CEOs, and administrators) is reasonable rather than exorbitant.

The second issue relates to the lack of objectivity found throughout the report. As an "independent, research organization," ([www.bgr.org](http://www.bgr.org)) BGR purports to undertake its mission in a nonpartisan and fair manner. Additionally, one would expect that the Cowen Institute, being affiliated with a major research institution, would also abide by minimal standards of academic non-bias. However, evidence of institutional bias is found in several places. On page 9, for example, the report states "In the case of the OPSB, there is no reason to think that consolidating authority under it . . . would produce different results." Later, on page 22, the report reiterates this view saying, "Calling on such a body (OPSB) to resume the same role in a drastically changed system, would be prima facie, ill-advised."

Aside from these obvious, unsupported statements of opinion what is surprising is that no differentiation is made between the OPSB pre-Katrina and post- Katrina. This type of "head in the sand" approach ignores the significant accomplishments of OPSB since Katrina. Largely unreported or underreported by the Times-Picayune is the fact that since Katrina OPSB has had successive unqualified (meaning good) audits. Since Katrina, the special education department has been cited for exceptional performance. Since Katrina, the OPSB has chartered and annually evaluated its 12 charter schools. Since Katrina, the OPSB has had stability in the ranks of superintendent. Since Katrina, OPSB schools have produced significant growth in the district performance score. Since Katrina, the OPSB has effectively partnered with the community to fund the renovation of the Mahalia Jackson School and establish the Early Childhood and Family Learning Center, a new community resource based upon a model of best practices around the country. Since Katrina, the OPSB has worked successfully with state education officials towards the successful renewal of vital millages and the development of the Facilities Master Plan, which provides over \$700 million dollars towards the construction and renovation of schools citywide.

Also troubling is the report's uncritical acceptance of the "reform success" touted by the Recovery School District and others in the media. For example, no mention is made in the report of the extensive and enlightening work of the Research on Reforms organization ([researchonreforms.org](http://researchonreforms.org)). Provocative articles such as "New Orleans schools decline following state's 'double standard' takeover"(Ferguson, 2010) and "Recovery school district's myth of 'educational turnaround' in New Orleans" (Hatfield, 2010) offer valuable, thoughtful views regarding the current status of reform efforts. The BGR/Cowen report notes the increase in the district performance score (dps) for New Orleans post- Katrina. While it is true that the district performance score did increase 10 points between 2004-2005 to 2007-2008, it does not say that the district performance score also increased 10 points between the years of 2002 to 2005.

Further, no mention whatsoever is made of the successive, troubling reports produced by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor ([www.la.state.la.us](http://www.la.state.la.us)) which show numerous instances of fiscal mismanagement. Specific issues were raised with regard to the use of millions of dollars in RESTART funds, which were monies given to help restart schools after Katrina, and the disbursement of funds for relocation and retention of teachers in the RSD. Other issues noted in a management letter dated May 13, 2009 were:

***Inaccurate and incomplete annual fiscal reports***  
***Inadequate subrecipient monitoring***  
***Untimely completion of payroll***  
***Inadequate fiscal monitoring of federal funds***  
***Inadequate oversight of school activity accounts***

***Inadequate control over payroll***  
***Theft of computers***  
***Failure to insure warehouse***

*These instances of bias* through omission reflect poorly on the credibility of the entire effort undertaken by BGR/Cowen. While the report is readily critical of the OPSB's past, it has nothing to say about the current flaws in governance of other entities, including some charter schools, and how that may inform and inspire future discussions about governance models.

The third issue revolves around the fact that virtually all of the governance models highlighted add to the bureaucracy in the educational landscape. With more bureaucracy come more questions about accountability. For example, model numbers two, three and four involve the creation of new entities to serve as either charter authorizers, facility managers/owners or both charter authorizer and facility managers. Such additions would only further complicate educational matters. It would be similar to the head chef of a major restaurant allowing someone else to control his/her access to the ingredients for all the meals while someone else has control of all the kitchen appliances including the oven, the refrigerator, and the microwave. This state of affairs would not work.

A related question is who would occupy the seats on these new entities? How would they be chosen? Who does the choosing? Would it be similar to a bill proposed in the current legislative session such as House bill 1154 ([legis.state.la.us](http://legis.state.la.us)) that would create a charter commission? If passed, the commissioners- to-be would all be appointed by powerful politicians such as the speaker of the house, the president of the senate, and the president of the board of elementary and secondary education. The governor would also appoint but only from nominations submitted by well- connected groups such as the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI) and the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL). In New Orleans, we need less elitism and plutocracy and more grassroots and democracy.

## **PART II**

### **THE SANDERS GOVERNANCE PLAN - THE NEW ORLEANS UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The issue of governance is key to ensuring that all students who attend public school in New Orleans are treated equitably and receive an excellent education. Those who will govern serve as the stewards of a great trust, the gatekeepers of vast public resources, the keepers of the dreams that thousands of parents have for their children.

I propose a new entity be organized to bear the name of The New Orleans Unified School District. This new school district will be vastly different from the current Orleans Parish School Board in its mission, its relationship to schools, and its relationship to the community. Yet, at the same time, this new school district will have the necessary infrastructure for public accountability to ensure equity and efficiency in the deployment of resources. Some people may not believe this can be done. I would direct them to an intriguing report published in 2002 by the Council of Great City Schools ([www.cgcs.org](http://www.cgcs.org)). The Council of Great City Schools is a well-established, national coalition of 66 of the nation's largest urban public school systems. The title of their report is Foundation for Success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement. Though space does not permit an extensive discussion of the report's findings, the report highlights how a variety of urban school districts, from those serving over 200,000 students to those serving 51,000 students, made substantive, lasting change in student achievement and business operations. It can be done, it can be done here, and it can be done our way. We can have a system that is unified, that respects school autonomy, engages the community, and most of all educates all children and reduces the achievement gap between races. With these thoughts in mind, the following five recommendations are made. The rationale for each recommendation is also provided.

**Recommendation #1: Reaffirm and retain our commitment to a single governing body for a unified school**

**district.**

Rationale: Parents, students, other elected officials and interested parties need a local place of last resort for the sake of accountability. Without a well-defined single source of accountability, ensuring that all students will have access to schools that treat them with equity and excellence will not occur.

**Recommendation #2: The elimination of all district-run schools (RSD or OPSB) through the enactment of key policies that mandate all schools to have a community-based governing board (charter or not), and site-based management.**

The newly-minted unified school district would no longer employ a superintendent, but a Chief Executive Officer, whose primary responsibilities would include facilitating the resolution of citywide educational issues, using objective data to ensure compliance with equitable practices and to monitor student achievement, and to promote innovation through cross-sharing of knowledge between all schools in areas from curriculum to accounting and facility management.

Rationale: The inspiration and excitement for the charter school movement lies principally in the quest for autonomy and the flexibility in approach in order to meet overarching goals. With the enactment of such policies, enshrined in the governance documents as core beliefs and practices, all schools, whether charter or not, would be guaranteed the type of flexibility and autonomy currently experienced.

**Recommendation #3: Election of all members citywide**

Rationale: All members should be elected not appointed. Appointments do not remove politics it merely changes the politics. Members of the governing body of the unified school district should be elected by the people just as members of the city council and the mayor. Additionally, all members of the board should be elected citywide or at-large. Members should be equally concerned about the whole, charters and non-charters, uptown and the east, rather than a part. District-based thinking is, and has been, myopic, self-centered, and impractical. Having all members elected citywide addresses such issues.

**Recommendation #4: Expansion of the board to nine members and term limits:**

Rationale: Expansion of the board from seven to nine members would allow for enough members to successfully engage in committee work in areas such as facilities, charter authorization, equity, academic innovation/quality, and strategic planning. It will also allow for potential greater diversity of membership.

All board members should be limited to two consecutive terms for reasons similar to those undergirding term limits for city offices such as Mayor and City Council. New ideas, new energy and new faces are needed to rekindle constant public interest and support.

**Recommendation #5: Transfer of RSD direct-run schools to the New Orleans Unified School District (to be run with community boards and site-based management); Transfer of OPSB direct-run schools to the New Orleans Unified School District (to be run with community boards and site-based management); Enactment of legislation (or transfer by BESE) making the New Orleans Unified School District the chartering entity for current RSD charter schools to enable the unification of the district to occur legally.**

It is important to note that what is recommended is not a mere return to the system of old. Charters will remain as long as they are successful. However, the many issues of equity that have arisen post-Katrina would be able to be

better addressed. Commonality of data on key areas of concern would be more readily available and usable to promote positive change.

Act 35, the law responsible for the state takeover of schools in Orleans Parish, includes a provision that requires the Recovery School District to recommend whether a school should remain in the RSD, close or be returned to local control. BESE, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, must act on the recommendation at least six months before the expiration of the initial five-year period of state takeover. The expiration is the end of 2010-2011 school year.

I have seen and witnessed public education in New Orleans as one of its employees, one of its leaders, and one of its end-users as a parent. The culmination of these experiences along with the consideration of the thoughts of leading researchers in the field of education has led to the series of recommendations presented herein. When making a decision that has the ability to impact generations of students and their families, it is critical that such a task be approached with the requisite objectivity regarding the current state of affairs, informed by the viewpoints and needs of the end-users, and balanced by the lessons learned from the past. May the citizens of New Orleans act wisely.