

**The Value of Community Voice
In Shaping the Future of Public Education**

A Collaboration between the Orleans Public Education Network
and the Loyola Institute for Quality and Equity in Education

April 2010

The Value of Community Voice In Shaping the Future of Public Education

A Collaboration Between the Orleans Public Education Network
and the Loyola Institute for Quality and Equity in Education

INTRODUCTION

Any public education governance structure serves two primary purposes – educating students and listening to the communityⁱ. A successful central administrative body will serve both of these goals. As the conversation begins regarding the future of schools entrusted to the Recovery School District, policymakers in Louisiana must decide what the future of education governance should look like in New Orleans. Rather than prescribing any particular governance model or process of arriving at that model, this paper seeks to assert several values that must be present in the process to ensure community participation and ownership of any decisions made.

PART ONE

Overview of Current Systems and Related Issues

Public education in New Orleans is governed by a unique multipartite system not seen anywhere else in the country. Five different governance structures administer schools in the city, and each governance structure serves a distinct student population.ⁱⁱ The distinct governance structures are as follows: Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) directly-run schools, OPSB charter schools, Recovery School District (RSD) directly-run schools, RSD charter schools, and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) charter schools. Charter and directly-run schools under the OPSB and the RSD are administered differently, with differing levels of autonomy, and are thus under distinct governance structures despite being overseen by the same boards.

Pre-Katrina, the OPSB was plagued by financial mismanagement and politicization that magnified the serious challenges faced by an under-performing school district.ⁱⁱⁱ In mid-November of 2005, after that year’s hurricanes devastated the city and its school system, a special session of the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 35. Act 35 allowed the RSD (which had been in existence for two years prior) to assume leadership of the majority of the schools in New Orleans by raising the threshold beyond which schools would be considered “academically in crisis.” The RSD was entrusted with control of these schools for a minimum of five years^{iv}, to allow for newly imposed instructional practices, expectations, and school culture to fully take root before returning the schools to local control.^v Meanwhile, the OPSB retained jurisdiction over only a small handful of schools.^{vi}

This diverse system of state and local, charter and directly-run schools is problematic in several ways. For example, schools of the various types lack a coordinated application process that would allow for true universal choice. While a “common application” exists, several school types do not accept it, which serves to inhibit or restrict access to these schools for many students and parents. Additionally, the RSD and the OPSB lack a working relationship – and have frequently been at odds – which inhibits

coordination or collaboration between the two districts. Without a common application and coordinated policies, no entity currently exists in Orleans Parish to actually ensure that all students are being educated.

Questions of equity have also been raised. It has been suggested that the multipartite system of schools may be contributing to a tiered hierarchy in which White and non-poverty students are disproportionately served in certain schools, while poor and minority students are disproportionately represented in others.^{vii} And with almost 80% of the city's schools governed by a state bureaucracy led by an appointed superintendent, some cite an impression that decisions are made behind closed doors without any sense of democratic incorporation.^{viii} Since education governance structures are responsible for both educating all public school students and responding to the community's education needs, both the inequitable service of students and the lack of democratic incorporation are highly problematic.

Because of these various issues, the multipartite system currently in place is not sustainable in the long run. At some point, schools will begin to return to a unified control, though the exact nature and structure of the control – as well as the process for determining it – are as yet unknown.

Part Two

Questions That Must Be Answered

As the conversation begins regarding the future of schools entrusted to the RSD, several questions need to be answered. Broadly speaking, these questions fall into three categories:

- **Who**, meaning the actual form and composition of the governing structure to which the schools will return, as local or state, elected or appointed, etc.;
- **What**, meaning the roles, responsibilities, and authority of the new governance structure and the extent to which leadership and decision-making would then be centralized or decentralized;
- **How**, meaning the method by which we get from today's multipartite system of schools to the future governance structure.

In order to answer these questions, several other key questions must also be addressed. While this list is surely not exhaustive, it will provide a framework to begin the conversation:

Who:

Who will make up this governance structure?

Will it be at the local or state level?

How many members?

Elected, appointed, or both? (And if both, how many of each?)

Will there be at-large board members? What about non-political board members, such as university researchers, community advocates, etc?

What –

What will be the responsibilities of the new governance structure, whatever form it takes?

How much autonomy will individual schools have, even those that are not charters? And what will be the role of governmental bodies, quasi-governmental bodies, charter networks and CMOs in making school-level decisions?

How –

How will the ‘Who’ and ‘What’ of the new governance structure be decided?

Who will be incorporated into the decision-making process? In other words, how much input will community members, advocates, and others have?

Will those making the decision take steps to incorporate those who traditionally have not had a voice in education policymaking? How?

How long will the transition take, as schools return to local control from the RSD?

Given the stated goal of community participation and ownership, the position articulated in this paper deals with the “how” questions. In particular, it will address the process for deciding what the future of education governance will look like. How should the community be involved in determining the future of schools currently under RSD leadership? This stands in contrast to the other “how” question, which addresses the process for transferring schools from the RSD to the new governing structure.

Part Three

Proposed Solutions

Others dealing with the question of the future of education governance have tended to focus exclusively on either the “what” or the “who” questions. In fact, this language of “what” versus “who” comes directly from former insurance executive, former BESE board member and education advocate, Leslie Jacobs. As recently as March 29, 2010, Jacobs presented the argument that the “what” questions must be answered before the actual composition and level of democracy of the new governance structure can be discussed.^{ix} Taking this tact, Jacobs organized a panel of experts and advocates to create a framework of functions that the future governance structure will have to perform. These functions, as articulated by this group, are:

- Charter authorization
- Facilities management
- Maintenance of district-wide finances
- Assurance that all children are served adequately regardless of exceptionality
- Communication
- Data use and coordinated planning

These six functions are informed by the fact that a majority of schools in New Orleans are already charters and by the idea that the percentage of charters will only increase in the coming years. (Jacobs projects that 80-85% of schools will be charter schools within the next few years.) Given a predominance of highly autonomous schools, Jacobs argues that

any single, unified governance structure will have to act as a point of coordination and unity, rather than as a more traditional administrative body.

Others, conversely, have addressed the “who” questions more explicitly. This entails directly addressing the political and administrative composition of the new governance body. In an interview with the *Times-Picayune* on August 27, 2009, State Superintendent Paul Pastorek was asked about the future of school governance and articulated four possibilities:

- A phased return of schools to the OPSB
- A return of schools to the OPSB with conditions
- The creation of a new local entity to govern schools
- A continuation of a strong, central state role in New Orleans school leadership

The first two possibilities – the phased return of schools to the OPSB and the return of schools to the OPSB with conditions – suggest a central role of process, or the “how” questions, without beginning to answer those questions. In the interview, Pastorek implied that he favored continuing RSD involvement in local schools for at least two years beyond the initial five-year period, as the RSD’s first two years in New Orleans schools were “consumed with crisis management.” He also stated that he doubted the OPSB’s ability to continue the “upward trajectory” begun by the RSD^x. In contrast, RSD superintendent, Paul Vallas, has not publicly advocated for any particular governance option. In the late 1990s, however, while acting as the appointed superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, he stated that New Orleans could not effect serious education reform without giving greater control to the mayor’s office, then headed by Marc Morial. Vallas argued at the time, that as a mayoral appointee, he had “a free hand in tackling problems.”^{xi}

Meanwhile, Mayor-Elect Mitch Landrieu stated at a January 2010 forum on public education that schools should remain as they are for three to five years, while also stating in a *Times-Picayune* interview that he believes there is “widespread support for preserving the status quo for two to five more years. As mayor, he said he hopes to forge agreement for how and when the transfer back to local control should take place.”^{xii} Andre Perry, co-leader of the education task force for Landrieu’s transition team, is quoted as saying that “it makes sense for a mayor to put attention on schooling. How could we have a vision for a quality city and not have a vision for quality schools?”^{xiii} But Perry’s assertion that the mayor should pay attention to education does not seem to be an endorsement of direct mayoral involvement in the governance structure.

Two major public opinion surveys conducted in 2009 indicate that New Orleans residents – or at least the registered voters polled – believe that schools are better now than they were before the 2005. In one of the surveys, sponsored by the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL), when asked whether schools should be returned to the OPSB, 45% of registered voters said they should not be returned at all, while 21% they should be returned within one to two years and 17% said they should be returned within three to five.^{xiv} In a similar vein and with a similar methodology, the Cowen Institute’s 2010 State of Public Education in New Orleans report argued that “while there is general support for school reforms to date...the majority of New Orleans voters and public school parents are still waiting for the reforms to bear significant fruit.”^{xv}

These polls and the media coverage thereof seem to suggest a unified community voice in support of post-Katrina reforms. Yet certain methodological and substantive issues exist with these particular polls^{xvi}, and beyond any such issues, such polls remain, at best, imperfect reflections of true community voice and insufficient replacements for true community participation.

Part Four

OPEN's and IQEE's Position on the Future of Governance

Whatever its composition, the future governing body must meet several criteria so that it ensures a high quality education for all students in New Orleans. First, the governance model must promote equitable and effective schools. In other words, the governance structure should operate within a context of enhancing support for effective schools and providing the support necessary for all schools to become effective ones^{xvii}. Additionally, New Orleans needs a governance model that is cost effective and transparent, allowing schools to use resources as they see fit while installing safeguards against graft and theft at both the school- and board-level. And finally, the future, unified school governance model must remove barriers to access to high-quality education experiences for all students.

However, rather than focusing on the “what” or the “who” questions, this collaboration seeks to address the “how.” In particular, the goal is to provide a foundation for the process by which community stakeholders will give voice to the future of education governance in New Orleans. The goal is to frame this process, rather than provide a prescriptive articulation of it. Above all, this collaboration believes that no action should be taken on the future of New Orleans education governance until the community has been vetted inclusively and democratically.

Democratic inclusion in the process of making any education governance decision has four key components. They are:

- Citizen participation,
- Equity
- Community ownership of the process and the final decision,

The presence of all of these components is essential to a truly democratic and inclusive decision-making process. The absence of any particular one will lead to the continued perception that decisions are being made without fully taking into account the voices and opinions are critical education stakeholders and members of the community.

To ensure citizen participation, decision-makers must take steps to engage members of the community in the policymaking process, throughout the process. The disparate opinions of the community must be heard and taken into account in a neutral, objective manner, without questions that might appear to be leading respondents. Policymakers should take active steps to ensure that they are in a position to listen to widely varying and diverse groups, without predisposition to any particular governance option. In order for this to be a fully informed and productive dialogue, those policymakers must also commit to providing data and objective information to the community. The final

decision regarding education governance should not be dictated to the New Orleans community, but should rather come out of a collaborative and participatory process.

Various community groups and institutions are currently engaged or could potentially be engaged in governance conversations. Many of these organizations and institutions have different strengths and foci (for example, research, workforce development, afterschool programming, etc) and constituencies (such as students with special needs, specific neighborhoods or school communities, etc). The resources of these groups can be leveraged in creating an ongoing, substantive dialogue through which their strengths are maximized and their expertise and concerns communicated.

The process must also be equitable. This means that steps should be taken to ensure that members of the community whose voices are least often heard or who are most likely to be disenfranchised must be particularly engaged. Some of these community members include residents of high-poverty neighborhoods, who have historically been less likely to have the social and economic capital that allow other groups to truly effect change. Similarly, parents of students with special needs should be particularly engaged, as any future governance decision could disparately impact their children. Other historically silent groups or community members must be identified and steps must be taken to ensure that they are included in the participatory decision making process. In this way, equity is an essential partner to the first two components of the democratic process, as it is necessary to ensure that the process is truly participatory and that all community members have ownership of the process and the final decision.

Finally, just as the final decision should not be dictated to the community, so too should the process itself not be dictated. Different community members, organizations and stakeholders will likely believe that their voices are best heard through different processes. Some might favor town hall-style meetings, others focus groups or panels, and yet others a written comment period. Other possibilities abound. In order to ensure that community members have true ownership of the decision-making process, all should have the opportunity to voice their opinions in the venue or manner that they believe is most effective for them personally. This implies that simply holding a series of town halls would be insufficient, as would simply running a series of public opinion surveys. Instead, policymakers must actively work to engage the community in a variety of ways. Thus engaging the community, policymakers must ensure that the final governance decision takes into account the variety of voices heard throughout the inclusionary process. To ensure citizen ownership, the process must truly incorporate community voices into the final decision.

Conclusion

For many of the schools placed under RSD leadership, the initial five-year period of state control is about to end. Education advocates and policymakers are thus beginning to engage in a discussion as to the future of state leadership in local schools. The final decision, regardless of the exact composition or functions of the new governance structure or the timeline for the transition to the new structure, should serve to ensure an excellent education for all New Orleans public school students and should remain open and responsive to the New Orleans community. To ensure this, policymakers should take steps to actively engage and invest the varied, diverse, and disparate community groups and members in both the decision-making process and the final decision. The process must be

informed by objective, non-ideological research as to what works and what doesn't in K-12 education. Such information will ensure both a participatory process that allows for input from an informed community and also a governance structure that will support and enhance continuing improvement. For its part, the community faces an obligation to engage in the process and to hold it accountable.

The process for achieving this community investment should not be prescribed or dictated to the community but should instead come from the community itself. A prescriptive dictation of the process would risk inhibiting true democratic incorporation and inclusion. The process can be framed, however, in terms of the values that should guide it, thereby ensuring community participation, citizen ownership, equity, and cohesion in the role of charter schools in the governance structure.

As New Orleans moves forward to a new public education governance structure, fidelity to these process values will provide a framework for a more inclusive and democratic policymaking process. This process will not eliminate discord or debate. Indeed, the democratic process is often highly contentious, as it requires bringing together people with different priorities, philosophies, and foci. But there is an opportunity here for a more constructive debate wherein disparate opinions are voiced and heard and incorporated into a more cohesive and collaborative policymaking process and wherein participants in the dialogue learn from each other. By such a process, New Orleans can arrive at a unified governance structure that remains responsive to the community while serving that community by increasing the academic achievement – and thus the overall life chances – of its children.

ⁱ See Chambers, Stephanie. 2006. *Mayors and Schools: Minority Voices and Democratic Tensions in Urban Education*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. In this book, Chambers, a professor at Trinity College in Connecticut, uses two variables to assess the success of mayoral control of schools in Chicago and Cleveland. Those variables are student achievement and democratic incorporation.

ⁱⁱ Gumus-Dawes, B. & Luce, T. (2010). *The state of public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans: The challenge of creating equal opportunity*. Minneapolis, MN: Institute on Race and Poverty. Study commissioned by the Loyola Institute for Quality and Equity in Education, New Orleans, LA.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Teachers of New Orleans, Louisiana Federal of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. (2006). *'National Model' or Flawed Approach? The Post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools*.

^{iv} Act 35 reads, "The recovery district shall retain jurisdiction over any school transferred to it for a period of not less than five years not including the year in which the transfer occurred if the transfer occurred during a school year." It requires the RSD to submit a report nine months before the end of this five year period detailing the status and recommended future of the school in question.

^v Cowen Institute. 2010. *Recovery School District of Louisiana*. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University. Available at <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/SPELA-RSD.pdf>

^{vi} Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. 2010. *The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report*. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University.

-
- vii Gumus-Dawes and Luce. *The state of public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of creating equal opportunity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota. Study commissioned by the Loyola Institute for Quality and Equity in Education, New Orleans, LA.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Jacobs, Leslie. 2010. "New Orleans Public School Governance... What's Next?" in *Leslie's Notebook*, March 29.
- x Thevenot, Brian. 2009. "Pastorek: State-run schools to persist." *Times-Picayune*. August 28, p1.
- xi Finch, Susan. 1998. "Chicago Schools Leader Urges Morial Takeover." *Times-Picayune*. September 15, p A1. Retrieved from LexisNexus Academic on March 30, 2010.
- xii Donze, Frank. 2010. "Landrieu Vows Hands-On Approach." *Times-Picayune*. March 10, p B2. Retrieved from LexisNexus Academic on March 30, 2010.
- xiii Ibid.
- xiv Council for a Better Louisiana. 2009. "CABL New Orleans Voter Survey." Retrieved March 30, 2010 (http://cabl.org/pdfs/CABL_Katrina_Poll_FINAL.pdf).
- xv Cowen Institute. 2010. *The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report*.
- xvi For a critical analysis of the CABL methodology, see Daliet, Angela. 2009. "CABL survey not an accurate measure of community and public education." SOS NOLA's Locker Notes, October 7, 2009. Retrieved April 14, 2010 (<http://sosnola.wordpress.com/2009/10/07/cabl-survey-not-an-accurate-measure-of-community-and-public-education/>).
- xvii "Effective schools" refers to a specific, research-based model that articulates several "correlates of effective schools". The governance structure should be one that provides support for all schools to meet these correlates, including: safe and orderly environments; climates of high expectations and success; principals as instructional leaders; clear and focused missions; opportunities for students to learn and "time on task"; frequent monitoring of student progress; and positive home-school relations. See www.effectiveschools.com