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Charter Schools in Louisiana: What Lessons Do They Have to Offer the Education Community?

Executive Summary

In the past five years, the public education landscape has changed dramatically in Louisiana. A confluence of events created an opportunity to restructure schools that had been failing for decades, particularly in New Orleans.

In 2003, the state established the Recovery School District (RSD) as a mechanism to take over failing public schools and turn them around. The move was not without controversy, but the prevailing sentiment was that the state needed to do something drastic to try to reverse the decline. What the state had not envisioned, however, was taking over schools on the scale created by Hurricane Katrina's devastation. In November 2005, almost three months after Katrina struck, the state took control of more than 100 of the lowest performing schools in Orleans Parish and transferred them into the RSD.

Faced with the task of rebuilding a school system from scratch, the RSD turned to the charter school model as a means to open several schools in a short period of time. Prior to Katrina, 18 charter schools operated in the state, including five in the RSD.

Today, the RSD oversees 66 schools in Orleans Parish – 37 of which are charter schools. In addition, two state-authorized charter schools that predate Katrina operate in New Orleans, as well as 12 charter schools overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board. At this point, more than 60 percent of the public school children in Orleans Parish are being educated in 51 charter schools. Outside New Orleans, 26 charter schools operate in 12 other school districts, including 11 schools supervised by the RSD. The early results of this shift in public education delivery show promise as evidenced by increasing test scores, but the sustainability of this extensive network of charter schools remains a question.

Given the state's decision to support charter schools as a tool to help improve the quality of public education in Louisiana, the Public Affairs Research Council undertook a study aimed at identifying best practices among the existing charter schools in an effort to determine which practices could be replicated in traditional public schools and in new charter schools. This study does not attempt to assess the academic performance of the charter schools in any depth, in large measure because the majority of the schools have only been open for a few years. However, the study does draw a connection between improving test scores and the best practices these schools have implemented.

The goal of identifying these best practices is to encourage to state to get the maximum benefit from the lessons being learned. While even the most enthusiastic proponents

of charter schools acknowledge the limitations of the movement, it is PAR's hope that lessons drawn from this study can be disseminated to districts and schools across the state and, in the process, have a broader impact on public education.

The data revealed a number of best practices that could be grouped into five categories.

- **Establishing a learning environment**
  Best practices: clearly defined academic expectations, clearly defined behavioral expectations, a rewards or incentive system to encourage good conduct, unity-building events, parental involvement initiatives, calm and encouraging atmosphere

- **Data-driven instruction**
  Best practices: clearly defined assessment structures, mandatory tracking and analysis of data generated from assessments, intervention plans

- **Student enrichment**
  Best practices: extended school days, extended school years, Saturday programs, summer programs, non-academic activities, field trips

- **Teacher support and development**
  Best practices: Informal and formal observations of classrooms, administrative and peer feedback, regularly scheduled planning periods, regularly scheduled department/grade level meetings, regularly scheduled faculty meetings, professional development

- **Policy-focused governing boards**
  Best practices: formal process for selecting new board members, diversity of skills among board members, clearly defined process for evaluating school leader, succession planning, formal board training

All of these best practices can be replicated in both traditional public schools and new charter schools, but they are labor-intensive and require a significant amount of organization and preparation before they can be implemented. Then they require ongoing monitoring and adjustment. In addition, these best practices will only produce the desired results if every administrator, faculty member and staff member supports them and is diligent about following them. In general, Louisiana's charter schools are better positioned to implement these best practices because of their autonomy and flexibility, their willingness to try different ways of running everything from the classroom to the lunchroom, their smaller class sizes and their ability to let people go for lack of commitment to the school's methods and culture.

It is not impossible for traditional public schools to implement these practices, however. A former Teach for America member who taught in both a traditional public school and a charter school is now a principal in a traditional public school. She has been able to put some of the best practices related to establishing a learning environment and data-driven instruction into effect because she has a sympathetic district superintendent. The RSD also has implemented a number of the best practices described here in its direct-run, or traditional, public schools.

The problem is that information about these practices tends to be exchanged primarily among those in the charter school community. At the same time, local school districts generally are suspicious of, if not hostile toward, charter schools. That makes it difficult to engage in a public dialogue about which practices are working well and which lend themselves to replication in traditional public schools. In light of this, PAR makes the following recommendation:

Recommendation 1: The state Department of Education should create an advisory council to conduct ongoing analysis of best practices in Louisiana charter schools that can be replicated in traditional public schools and help develop guidelines for how these best practices might be implemented. Further, the council should prepare an annual report for dissemination among all local school districts.

The data also showed some areas of ongoing concern for charter schools, including funding, facilities, community outreach and transparency. Transparency, in particular, is a concern because it refers to the ease with which the public can access information about existing and proposed charter schools. Unfortunately, the charter school landscape in Louisiana remains difficult for many parents to navigate. Therefore, PAR has two recommendations to enhance the transparency of charter schools:

Recommendation 2: The state Department of Education should maintain a Web site with an accurate and easily accessible inventory of charter schools statewide, along with copies of their charters, amendments to those charters, the process for third-year performance evaluations and for charter renewals, and summary budget documents, to ensure maximum transparency in the expenditure of public dollars. In addition, the Web site should provide links to all of the charter schools' Web sites.

Recommendation 3: State law should require each charter school to have a Web site that provides such information as the school's physical address, phone number and name of a specific contact person; a list of administrators, faculty and staff, and their work contact information; a list of governing board members, and the time and place of all of their meetings for the school year; and the agendas for all board meetings so that parents and other interested parties will know ahead of time what is to be discussed. In addition, each school should provide a clear explanation of its admission requirements, if there are any, and a step-by-step explanation of how to register.

Two substantive questions remain unanswered in the ongoing charter school experiment in Louisiana. Are charter schools making significant, long-lasting improvements in their students' performance, and how sustainable are charter schools themselves?

On the question of how well charter schools are educating their students, the best way to gauge their performance would be to follow a cohort of students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Some data already exist from the state's original charter schools, i.e., those that have been in operation since before Katrina, and they indicate that most of the schools are helping their students reach state performance targets.

However, limited performance data exist for the Type 5 charter schools, which is the designation for charter schools formed under the jurisdiction of the state Board of

Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and supervised by the RSD. It will take more time to determine whether the Type 5 charter schools are achieving their goals simply because the oldest ones only began operating in 2004-2005.

In terms of sustainability, success will depend on the resolution of problems in such areas as funding, facilities, community relationships and transparency. Almost all of the funding for charter schools in Louisiana comes from public money – federal, state and local. However, it is generally not enough to pay the costs of educating the schools' students. Any additional money, therefore, must come from private fundraising efforts, and some charter schools are more successful at that than others.

The question of facilities continues to be a difficult one. The problem is that there simply are not enough available buildings to meet the demand, and those that are available frequently require significant renovation and maintenance, both of which are difficult for charter schools operating with limited budgets.

Community support is another important factor for charter schools, particularly when it comes to the Type 5 charter schools, which are the takeover schools. School leaders often must try to diffuse the emotional backlash from the surrounding neighborhoods because parents and students feel that their schools have been taken away from them. That makes it important for charter school officials to build relationships with their neighbors.

Lastly, there are concerns about transparency, or how easy it is for the public to access information about charter schools in Louisiana.

One possible solution to the question of sustainability may be the creation of small clusters, or networks, of charter schools. The best known such network is the Algiers Charter Schools Association, which has nine schools on the West Bank of New Orleans. The association's small central office coordinates such things as transportation, food services, maintenance and human resources for all of the schools. In that way, the association is able to take advantage of economies of scale for needed services and give its principals more time to focus on curriculum and instruction. Other small networks in New Orleans include the four KIPP charter schools and the two FirstLine Schools (Green and Ashe charter schools). In addition, Advance Baton Rouge has four charter schools in East Baton Rouge Parish and one in Pointe Coupee Parish.

The charter school experiment is just underway in New Orleans and in the state as a whole. The early indications are that it is succeeding in bringing student achievement up, but more time is needed. The research here has identified some best practices that can help increase the chances for success among Louisiana's charter schools. Further, these best practices do not have to be unique to charter schools; they can be implemented in any school and in any district where a willingness to try new ideas exists. The state should take advantage of this opportunity and growing public support to encourage all public schools to adopt those best practices that might work for them.

Charter school proponents believe firmly that charter schools are not a panacea for what ails public education in Louisiana and the United States. However, the charter school model is a viable and valuable option in the arsenal of public school choices available to districts and parents and a valuable resource in developing and trying out new tools to break the cycle of poor student performance.

Introduction

Charter school – an independent public school that provides a program of elementary and/or secondary education established pursuant to and in accordance with the provisions of the Louisiana Charter School Law to provide a learning environment that will improve pupil achievement.

Traditionally, public education has not been Louisiana's strong suit. For years, on list after list, the state has ranked at or near the bottom when it comes to student performance. And leading Louisiana in this headlong charge to the bottom was the Orleans Parish public school system, which consistently was rated one of the worst-performing school districts in the nation.

After Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, the public education landscape in New Orleans, and in Louisiana, changed dramatically. In November 2005, the state of Louisiana took control of more than 100 of the lowest performing schools in Orleans Parish and transferred them into the Recovery School District (RSD). The Orleans Parish School Board was left with oversight of five high-performing schools – that number has since dropped to four – and 12 charter schools, 11 of which had been traditional public schools or Citywide Access Schools (magnet schools) before Katrina.

Over the past four years, the RSD has reopened approximately two-thirds of the public schools in Orleans Parish. Today, the RSD oversees 66 schools in Orleans Parish – 37 charter schools and 29 traditional public schools. In addition, two state-authorized charter schools that predate Katrina operate in New Orleans today.

At this point, more than 60 percent of the public school children in Orleans Parish are being educated in 51 charter schools. The early results of this shift in public education delivery show promise as evidenced by increasing test scores (see Appendix A), but the sustainability of this extensive network of charter schools remains a question.

Some schools are improving more slowly than others, including the two alternative schools set up to serve students with specific needs, but overall the numbers show that more progress is being made in student achievement now than prior to Katrina.

Outside New Orleans, 26 charter schools operate in 12 other school districts. Of those 26, 11 are under the supervision of the RSD. Given the state's decision to support charter schools as a tool to help improve the quality of public education in Louisiana, the Public Affairs Research Council undertook a study aimed at identifying best practices among the schools in an effort to determine which practices could be replicated in new charter schools and in traditional public schools. This study was not designed to assess the academic performance of charter schools in Louisiana.

Data for the study were collected during visits to 19 of the 77 charter schools (see Appendix A) operating in Louisiana and during interviews with principals, teachers, board members and parents directly involved with those schools. The majority of the site visits – 10 – were to schools in New Orleans. Six schools in East Baton Rouge Parish were visited, and the other three visits occurred at schools in Avoyelles Parish, Lafourche Parish and Plaquemines Parish.

In addition, interviews were conducted with more than a dozen people involved in the larger charter school community. They represented such groups as the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, New Schools for New Orleans, Educate Now and the state Department of Education's Office of Charter Schools, as well as other organizations and charter school networks. In total, nearly 75 people were interviewed. Finally, other research reports, documents and newspaper articles focusing on charter schools at both the state and national level were examined.

The information gleaned from the research then was entered into a qualitative data analysis software program and examined for commonalities, differences and any

other information that could help guide the study and its conclusions. The data revealed a number of best practices that could be grouped into five categories – establishing a learning environment, data-driven instruction, student enrichment, teacher support and development, and policy-focused governing boards – and resulted in three recommendations for action.

Before explaining the findings in more detail, a little background on charter schools will help give the study some context.

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are independent, autonomous public schools operated by nonprofit organizations that apply to a charter school authorizer for permission to open a school. As autonomous entities, charter schools are not bound by the same rules that govern traditional public schools. Across the United States, several types of authorizers exist: local school boards, state education agencies, higher education institutions, independent chartering boards and mayors/municipalities. In Louisiana, only local school boards and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) may approve charters.

Charter schools were conceived of as an alternate way to educate at-risk children who were being failed by the country's traditional public education system. The premise was that all children could learn, but that at-risk children needed more attention and more resources than they typically received in a traditional public school. In addition, charter school proponents believe firmly that the academic expectations for disadvantaged children should be just as high as they are for affluent students and that it is not unreasonable to expect their students will go on to college.

Charter school operators are free to organize their curricula however they wish, use whatever textbooks or teaching materials they prefer, and hire and fire faculty and staff as needed. It is this latter component that many in the charter school movement believe is crucial because one of the biggest criticisms of traditional public school systems is that they often become havens for incompetent teachers and administrators.

Charter school operators may or may not have admissions criteria for their students. In Louisiana, which has five different categories, or types, of charter schools (see Table 1), the law permits those schools in Types 1, 2, 3 and 4 to have admissions requirements as long as the requirements are specified in the school's charter, the school's charter authorizer approves the requirements, and the requirements are relevant to the school's role, scope and mission. In addition, the admission requirements cannot be used to exclude any student on the basis of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, national origin or intelligence level. Only charter schools in the Type 5 category must have open admissions.

In exchange for the freedom to run their schools as they see fit, charter school operators agree to meet state and local educational standards. If they fail to meet these goals within a specified period of time – often five years – their charters may not be renewed or may be revoked.

Charter schools have existed in the United States for roughly 19 years. The first charter school law was passed by Minnesota in 1991, and the first charter school opened in 1992. Today, there are more than 4,500 charter schools in 39 states and the District of Columbia and about 1.4 million students enrolled in them. Despite the amount of attention given to charter schools in the past few years, the number of students they serve accounts for only about 3 percent of the total number of public school children in the United States.

Louisiana's charter school law dates from 1995 when legislators approved a pilot program designed to allow up to eight school districts to set up charter schools. In 1997, legislators rewrote the law to permit charter schools in all school districts and to establish four categories of charter schools (see Table 1). Since then, lawmakers have created a fifth category of charter school for use by

Table 1. Charter School Types, Descriptions

Type	Description
Type 1	A start-up school authorized by the local school board. Only students who live in the local school district are eligible to attend. The charter school may have admission requirements. There are five Type 1 charter schools in Louisiana.
Type 2	A start-up school or a conversion of a pre-existing school authorized by BESE. Any student living in the state is eligible to attend. The charter school may have admission requirements. There are 11 Type 2 charter schools in Louisiana.
Type 3	A conversion of a pre-existing school authorized by the local school board. Students who live in the pre-existing school's attendance zone have first preference for enrollment, followed by any student living in the local school district. The charter school may have admission requirements. There are nine Type 3 charter schools in Louisiana.
Type 4	A start-up school or a conversion of a pre-existing school authorized by BESE where the local school board is the applicant. Only students who live in the local school district are eligible to attend unless the district has set up attendance agreements with other school districts. The charter school may have admission requirements. There are four Type 4 charter schools in Louisiana.
Type 5	A conversion of a pre-existing school that has been taken over by the Recovery School District. BESE must authorize the charter. Only students who live in the local school district are eligible to attend. The charter school must be open admission. There are 48 Type 5 charter schools in Louisiana.

SOURCE: Louisiana Revised Statutes 17:3973

the Recovery School District, eliminated the cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in Louisiana, imposed an administrative fee on charter school operators that is to be paid to local school districts and mandated third-party review of all charter school applications, among other things.

As noted previously, 77 charter schools currently operate in the state, with approximately 15 more charter schools approved for the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years. In addition, more charter schools could be approved for the 2011-2012 school year because another application period will be available later this year. The majority of charter schools in Louisiana – 51 – are in Orleans Parish. Thirteen operate in East Baton Rouge Parish, and the other 13 are scattered throughout the state from Caddo Parish to Plaquemines Parish (see Table 1). The bulk of charter schools in the state (48) are Type 5 charter schools and are under the supervision of the RSD. The oldest charter school in Louisiana is the Jefferson Community School in Jefferson Parish. It opened in the 1996-1997 school year and is still operating.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, 18 charter schools operated in the state. Post-Katrina, 59 others have opened, including 12 that are in their first year of operation in 2009-2010. In addition, 11 other charter schools have opened and closed between 1996 and 2009. The most recent school to close was New Orleans Free Academy. Its board of directors voluntarily shut the school down at the end of the 2008-2009 school year because of the school's inability to make sufficient academic progress.

The findings

The goal of this study was to determine what practices among the charter schools could be replicated in both new charter schools and in traditional public schools. Five areas emerged from the data: establishing a learning environment, data-driven instruction, student enrichment, teacher support and development, and policy-focused governing boards.

Establishing a learning environment

A school's learning environment – or school culture – is one of the keys to driving student achievement in the charter schools examined here. In general, a successfully established school culture means a calm,

Best practices

- *Clearly defined academic expectations*
- *Clearly defined behavioral expectations*
- *A rewards or incentive system to encourage good conduct*
- *Unity-building events*
- *Parental involvement initiatives*
- *Calm and encouraging atmosphere*

Table 2. Per-pupil funding amount (Fiscal Year 2009-2010)

Parish	Per-Pupil Amount	Parish	Per-Pupil Amount
Acadia	$ 7,020	**Orleans[1]**	**$ 7,837**
Allen	$ 9,148	Ouachita	$ 8,522
Ascension	$ 8,255	**Plaquemines[1]**	**$ 11,315**
Assumption	$ 9,165	**Point Coupee[1]**	**$ 8,346**
Avoyelles[1]	**$ 6,518**	Rapides	$ 7,901
Beauregard	$ 8,698	Red River	$ 9,939
Bienville	$ 11,670	**Richland[1]**	**$ 8,341**
Bossier	$ 7,953	Sabine	$ 8,693
Caddo[1]	**$ 8,229**	St. Bernard	$ 8,426
Calcasieu	$ 8,344	St. Charles	$ 12,178
Caldwell	$8,299	St. Helena	$ 7,926
Cameron	$ 12,799	St. James	$ 10,760
Catahoula	$ 7,640	St. John the Baptist	$ 8,804
Claiborne	$ 9,602	St. Landry	$ 7,173
Concordia	$ 8,048	St. Martin	$ 7,627
DeSoto	$ 9,413	**St. Mary[1]**	**$ 8,516**
East Baton Rouge[1]	**$ 8,963**	St. Tammany	$ 9,206
East Carroll	$ 7,809	Tangipahoa	$ 7,187
East Feliciana	$ 7,938	Tensas	$ 8,937
Evangeline	$ 7,885	Terrebonne	$ 7,637
Franklin[1]	**$ 7,679**	**Union[1]**	**$ 8,144**
Grant	$ 7,157	Vermillion	$ 7,226
Iberia	$ 8,286	Vernon	$ 7,441
Iberville	$ 9,630	Washington	$ 8,181
Jackson	$ 9,394	Webster	$ 8,444
Jefferson[1]	**$ 8,318**	West Baton Rouge	$ 9,116
Jefferson Davis	$ 8,953	West Carroll	$ 7,582
Lafayette[1]	**$ 7,827**	West Feliciana	$ 10,116
Lafourche[1]	**$ 8,116**	Winn	$ 8,790
LaSalle	$ 8,428	**City of Monroe[1]**	**$ 8,724**
Lincoln	$ 8,667	City of Bogalusa	$ 9,324
Livingston	$ 7,574	Zachary Community	$ 8,614
Madison	$ 9,994	City of Baker	$ 10,101
Morehouse	$ 8,775	Central Community	$ 7,078
Natchitoches	$ 8,245		

SOURCE: Louisiana Department of Education Web site

[1] District has at least one charter school.

orderly environment in the school where teachers are able to concentrate more on instruction rather than discipline. A clearly defined, clearly explained, clearly visible school culture focuses on both academic and behavioral expectations. It also uses a rewards or incentive system to encourage good conduct and unity-building events to create camaraderie among students and faculty. In addition, a successful school culture includes an emphasis on parental involvement.

Depending on whether the school is an elementary or high school, the academic expectations generally revolve around students scoring well on state-mandated tests, being accepted into a high-quality, high-performing high school, going on to college, or completing a career track program

with the appropriate certification and immediately entering the job market.

The second component of a school culture is what behavioral expectations are in place for students. School officials indicated that the behavioral expectations are equally as, if not more, important than the academic expectations. The concept is simple. In order for effective learning to take place, the school environment must be calm and orderly, not chaotic. Accomplishing that, however, is difficult because many of the students served by charter schools come from backgrounds where they are not accustomed to having to control their behavior. As a result, administrators and faculty go to great lengths to instill codes of conduct in their students and to reinforce the behavioral expectations.

They do this through a variety of methods, including the use of different types of incentive systems that reward students for good behavior and set up consequences for bad behavior. Other methods include a daily assembly at which students are recognized for their accomplishments, special events on Friday afternoons, such as free ice cream or pizza, or a regularly scheduled school store period during which students can buy things with the points they have earned through their good behavior.

At Samuel J. Green Charter School and Arthur Ashe Charter School in New Orleans, administrators and teachers use a "Benefit Bucks" system where students earn "Bucks" for good behavior. They can use the "Bucks" to buy things from the school store or take part in special trips or also earn the right to wear a different color uniform shirt. Lafayette Academy Charter School in New Orleans has a similar rewards program in place called "SuperTickets." The students earn the tickets for good behavior and good grades and can use them to buy things at the school SuperStore. For Christmas 2008, school administrators said, more students saved their tickets to buy presents for their siblings and their parents than used them to buy things for themselves.

The KIPP schools use a "weekly paycheck" system under which students accumulate points for good behavior and lose them for bad behavior. The idea behind the system is to teach the students that their behavior is something they can control and to teach them that there are good choices and bad choices and consequences for each.

Parental involvement is another facet of school culture, but one that the charter schools have had difficulty with. A few of the schools in this study strongly encourage parental volunteer work once a child is enrolled, such as Lake Forest Elementary Charter School. The school has a Parental Involvement Contract under which parents agree to pick up their children's report cards, make sure their children follow the rules and regulations, and agree to provide five hours of volunteer service at the school per family during each academic year. At the same time, state law says that charter schools cannot require parental involvement as a condition of enrollment, nor can they penalize students whose parents choose not to get involved.

Green Charter School has tried to engage parents through such things as its Open Garden Day or Family Dinner Night. At New Orleans College Prep, administrators were delighted when 350 parents turned out for an orientation session on the Saturday before school started this past fall. And at Prescott Middle School in Baton Rouge, a group of fathers comes to the school regularly to help out. Despite these efforts to encourage parental involvement, school leaders say they have had only limited success.

Another facet of the charter schools in this study is the atmosphere administrators and teachers work to create for students. Visitors to charter schools often point out how calm the schools are. Even when students change classes or move from one activity to another, they do so in an orderly fashion, and teachers and administrators spend a great deal of time at the beginning of the year instilling these habits in their students. In addition, the charter schools studied here were clean and bright and decorated

throughout with the schools' individual mottos or with banners from the colleges faculty members attended. The result is an atmosphere that encourages students to work hard and to pursue high academic goals.

Establishing such a school culture has been somewhat easier for the start-up charter schools examined here because school administrators and faculty have been able to focus on two or three grades initially, such as kindergarten through second grade. Then as a grade is added each year, they have only had to start from scratch with the incoming kindergartners.

In the case of the New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy, which is a high school, the school opened in 2008-2009 with just a ninth-grade class and plans to add a grade a year until it becomes a full, four-year high school. By adding just one grade a year, administrators and teachers can focus their attention on establishing the school culture with each new class, while older students are expected to model the school's academic and behavioral expectations.

For the conversion schools or turnaround schools, where the charter operator has taken over a school whole cloth, establishing a new school culture has been more difficult because the students, parents and remaining faculty were accustomed to doing things a different way or were unaccustomed to being held accountable for explicit academic and behavioral expectations. At Lafayette Academy Charter School, where the current administration took over after the school was run by a charter management organization for a year, administrators, staff and faculty had to work hard to "get on the same page" with a standards-based, data-driven and child-centered approach to teaching. They also had to work hard to build relationships with the children and their families, something that is difficult in a school with 780 students.

Regardless of whether the charter was a start-up or a conversion, interviews with school principals and teachers showed that the work to establish and maintain a school culture is constant and ongoing. The work starts during teacher orientation and professional development sessions prior to the beginning of school when all faculty and staff members are trained in the academic and behavioral expectations that guide the school's mission. Then students and parents are introduced to the same academic and behavioral expectations at the beginning of the school year.

Reinforcement of the expectations is achieved with the posting school mottos and conduct rules throughout buildings and classrooms. For instance, at New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy, the guiding behavior program is SPARK: S = sit up straight; P = place hands on top of desk or pencil to paper; A = always ask and answer questions; R = respect at all times; and K = keep tracking at all times. At Children's Charter School in Baton Rouge, the student conduct code is encapsulated in "Rising STARS," where STARS stands for self-confidence, time on task, achievement and respect.

In addition, teachers are expected to provide added reinforcement during class time by dealing with infractions immediately and consistently. In the same way, good conduct and academic achievement are praised, and students earn rewards to mark their accomplishments.

The school cultures examined here are as unique as the schools themselves. At Lafayette Academy Charter School, administrators have built the school's teaching culture around the book "Kids Left Behind." The book discusses and demonstrates how urban schools are closing the achievement gap, and administrators have used the book to create an integrated academic structure for the school that aligns the curriculum from grade to grade.

The International School of Louisiana focuses on trying to teach its students to embrace a diversity of cultures and learning styles. The school's teachers, who come from 17 different countries, bring their cultural

backgrounds to the classroom in the form of dress, dance, music, food and holidays in an effort to instill an understanding of the larger global world in their students.

Before they even start classroom instruction, administrators and teachers at most of the charter schools in this study spend considerable time explaining and modeling their school's culture for their students. As the school year progresses, administrators and teachers spend more time monitoring and reinforcing the elements of their school culture, particularly the behavioral aspect of it. Ideally, the behavioral expectations become second nature to students. When that happens, the school environment becomes much more conducive to learning. Ultimately, the creation of a school culture and the acceptance of that school culture by students, parents and faculty help foster a sense of unity and a sense of purpose.

Data-driven instruction

Best practices

- *Clearly defined assessment structures*
- *Mandatory tracking and analysis of data generated from assessments*
- *Intervention plans*

An intense focus on data-driven instruction is another characteristic of the charter schools in this study. All of them have student assessment structures in place, but the systems they use vary as much as the schools themselves. The only exception is that they all give the state-mandated standardized tests every spring.

There are three critical pieces to data-driven instruction. One is gathering the data from whatever assessments are used. The second is analyzing the data to see where students are progressing and where they are falling behind. The third is formulating a plan to address any problems and carrying it out.

Across the 19 schools examined in this study, student skills and progress are measured using some combination of formative assessments, interim assessments, daily assessments, end-of-year assessments, benchmark tests and high-stakes tests. Although they vary in purpose and design, each of the measures cited here is designed to give teachers and administrators important information about their students' academic performance. Formative assessments are given at the beginning of the school year and provide administrators and teachers with information about what level of skills students have achieved. From there they can determine where best to place students. Daily assessments, interim assessments and benchmark tests all give teachers an up-to-date picture of what their students are learning, what they are not learning and whether they are reaching certain predetermined progress points. The end-of-year assessments and the high-stakes tests are designed to give a more complete picture of what students have learned throughout the school year.

The schools in this study assess their students' progress constantly, but the testing programs they use vary. For instance, Lafayette Academy Charter School and Lake Forest Elementary Charter School both use the Target Teach program, which is a curriculum alignment program that includes incremental testing and benchmarks modeled after state exams.

Many of the schools also use the DIBELS system out of the University of Oregon to track the reading progress of students in the primary grades. Among them are Belle Chasse Academy and J.K. Haynes Elementary Charter School and Lanier Elementary School in Baton Rouge.

Other schools, such as Prescott Middle School in Baton Rouge and the schools in the Algiers Charter Schools Association, use the state EAGLE testing system (Enhanced Assessment of Grade Level Expectations), which is online-based. The EAGLE system provides pre-made tests in English Language Arts and mathematics based on the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum, but it also allows teachers to create their own tests and to have their students take the tests via computer.

Finally, other charter schools create their own testing frameworks. Teachers and administrators at Children's Charter School in Baton Rouge, for example, spent the summer of 2009 creating their own end-of-year assessments for their students. The next step will be to develop a bank of already prepared tests consisting of pre-tests, assessment tests, unit tests and other measures that teachers can use to assess student progress. The Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences in Bunkie has created a benchmark system under which its students are tested three times a year.

Daily assessments are used at a few of the schools in this study. At New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy, for example, teachers use daily exit tickets as part of their tracking of student progress. Exit tickets are used in every class and are supposed to be exactly aligned with each day's objectives. During the last five minutes of class, the students have to fill the ticket out. The results then are entered into a database and the data are reviewed the next day. The school also uses quarterly interim assessments that were created before the school year started. The assessments are aligned with state and ACT standards. In addition, there are bi-weekly assessments done by the teachers, and those in turn are aligned with the quarterly assessments.

At the MAX Charter School in Thibodaux, teachers take a somewhat different approach because of the student population they serve. The MAX school is geared toward serving students with dyslexia and other related learning difficulties. Its students typically do not do well on standardized tests, so teachers look more at students' fluency, decoding ability, comprehension, the number of words per minute they can read, and their skills with spelling and shapes.

The second component of data-driven instruction is analysis. After gathering their assessment data, the teachers and administrators in most of these charter schools meet to examine what the data show. At many of the schools, teachers meet weekly to discuss student progress; at others, the meetings are not as frequent. For example, teachers at schools in the UNO-Capital One Network meet on the last Friday of each month to go over student data.

The frequency of these meetings is not as important as the fact that they take place and that teachers have the chance to develop plans to help lagging students, which is the third component of data-driven instruction. Teachers and administrators at the charter schools studied here work hard to find ways to help struggling students. In general, teachers are free to decide how best to provide help to those students who need it, whether that means re-teaching material, pulling students out of a regular class for more specialized instruction in a subject such as reading or encouraging students to take advantage of school tutoring programs. The goal is to make sure every student is on grade level and is mastering the skills necessary to move on to the next grade.

Student enrichment

Student enrichment is another facet of the charter schools. It can take many forms and includes such things as a longer school day, a longer school year, Saturday school, summer school, non-academic activities and other extracurricular activities such as field trips.

Best practices

- *Extended school days*
- *Extended school years*
- *Saturday programs*
- *Summer programs*
- *Non-academic activities*
- *Field trips*

Most of the schools in this study had an extended day, meaning they were open well beyond the typical hours for traditional public schools. Samuel J. Green and Arthur Ashe charter schools had the longest day of the schools examined: 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. The schools provide a Before Care program from 6:30 to 7:30 a.m. and classes start at 7:30. The academic portion of the day ends between 4:30 and 5 p.m., and the schools offer an After Care program until 6 p.m.

KIPP Believe College Prep in New Orleans had the longest academic day, with classes starting at 7:30 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m. In addition, there is a homeroom period every day before classes start and after they end.

The rest of the schools tended to start classes between 7:30 and 8:15 a.m. and end them between 3 and 4 p.m. After classes end, virtually all of them offered enrichment activities until 5 or 6 p.m. At some of the schools, faculty members oversee the after-class activities; at others, the school administration contracts with an outside organization to run the enrichment program.

For example, students at Belle Chasse Academy participate in one of 40 different clubs after classes, and the clubs are run by faculty members who have an interest in the particular activity. The school also offers an after-school homework session for those students who want to take advantage of it. In contrast, the New Orleans Charter Science and Math High School provides its students with an opportunity to participate in such activities as dance, theater and the spoken word, but it contracts with Big Buddy to run the activities.

Lusher Charter School offers an extensive selection of after-school activities ranging from the arts to sports. The school has an Art After Hours program for which parents can register their children, and activities include drama, dance, art, music and photography classes. In addition, Lusher fields several sports teams, as do Lafayette Academy Charter School, Prescott Middle School and Belle Chasse Academy.

Beyond the regular school day, some of the schools have classes on occasional Saturdays, including KIPP Believe and J.K. Haynes Elementary Charter School in Baton Rouge. At KIPP Believe, students attend classes on six different Saturdays. The focus is on community awareness activities, rather than academics. At Haynes, students preparing for the LEAP tests attend school every Saturday in October. Haynes also offers a month-long Summer Institute program to help students catch up in areas where they are behind or stay on track. In addition, some of the schools had longer school years than the traditional public schools in their districts. That is, classes started earlier in the summer and went later in the spring.

Several of the schools also organize field trips for their students. New Orleans College Prep administrators, for instance, took their students on a trip to the Louisiana State University campus in Baton Rouge. School administrators wanted their students to be able to visualize what a college campus looks like and to begin to consider the possibility that they could attend college.

At Green Charter School, administrators and staff organize a year-end retreat for each grade. In addition, the school offers students access to the Power Ties program. The program focuses on weeklong training for students on how to dress, speak, answer phones and develop job skills. The students write their resumes, sit through mock interviews and have lunch with a guest speaker who talks about career goals. Then they have a chance to do some job shadowing at different agencies.

The enrichment activities are a crucial element of the charter schools, given that the majority of students enrolled in them are considered to be at-risk. Because of that, these students tend to have had little exposure to such things as college campuses or the arts or science or job skills training or tutoring and homework help. The availability of these things provides an added layer of instruction and experience that can help students see they have a variety of options for the future.

Teacher support and development

Establishing a school culture, organizing a data-driven instruction system and putting together enrichment activities

Best practices

- *Informal and formal observation of classrooms*
- *Administrative and peer feedback*
- *Regularly scheduled planning periods*
- *Regularly scheduled department/grade level meetings*
- *Regularly scheduled faculty meetings*
- *Professional development*

are not enough in and of themselves to assure the success of a charter school. Another critical piece of the puzzle is the quality of a school's teachers.

Charter school teachers in Louisiana range from the brand new to veterans with 25 or more years of experience. The distribution of experience tends to be uneven, with schools that predate Hurricane Katrina generally having more experienced teachers and newer Recovery School District charters having less experienced teachers. That means that schools like Lusher Charter School and Lake Forest Elementary Charter School, which were Citywide Access Schools (or magnet schools) prior to Katrina, have a higher proportion of veteran teachers on staff, as do the New Orleans Charter Science and Math High School, Belle Chasse Academy and the Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences.

The split is not absolute. Green Charter School and Lafayette Academy Charter School, which are RSD charters, also have a mix of veteran and new teachers. On the other hand, Lanier Elementary School in Baton Rouge has 10 Teach for America teachers on its staff. Overall, the range of experience among Lanier's teachers runs from one to five years, as does that of teachers at New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy.

Whether their faculty consists primarily of veteran teachers or a significant proportion of new teachers, the administrators of the schools in this study agreed that it is crucial to have strong teacher support and professional development structures in place to ensure that everyone is working toward the same goals in terms of academic and behavioral expectations, student discipline and instruction. In addition, given the labor-intensive nature of the work, it is equally important to provide less experienced teachers with substantive mentoring and support to keep them from becoming overwhelmed. These support and professional development structures vary from school to school, but all of them involve formal and informal observation, feedback, regularly scheduled planning periods and faculty meetings and professional development training.

At the Algiers Charter Schools Association, administrators have instituted the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) in the association's nine schools. TAP is an initiative of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching that focuses on teacher development through a comprehensive system of training, support and evaluation. It focuses on four components – multiple career paths, ongoing applied professional growth, instructionally focused accountability and performance-based compensation. Under TAP, the Algiers schools have restructured their days so that teachers have regularly scheduled meetings at which they can talk with their colleagues, plan lessons, share experiences and learn new instructional strategies. In addition, the schools have set up an evaluation process that calls for teachers to be observed several times throughout the year and rewards them both on how much their students improve over the academic year and on how much the entire student body improves.

At The MAX Charter School, the school director evaluates teachers' classroom management skills and their students' behavior. He also does walk-through observations three or four times per year per teacher. The school's curriculum consultant assesses whether the teachers are teaching what and how they are supposed to teach. Twice a year, the director and the curriculum consultant sit down and compare notes and then talk with teachers. In addition, the school frequently sends its teachers to conferences and other professional gatherings.

The principal and assistant principal at Prescott Middle School handle teacher monitoring. Each of them tries to observe three teachers a day. They leave a copy of the observation form in the teacher's file, and they have meeting with teachers throughout the week. In addition, the teachers hold grade-level cluster meetings, which the school's master teacher runs. The

goal is to mirror the Teacher Advancement Program model. The focus of the meetings varies. For new teachers, there might be a teacher-led demonstration of new techniques or a discussion of peer observations with an aim toward establishing and maintaining rigor. The School Improvement Plan is used to drive the professional development process.

Teacher assessments at Belle Chasse Academy are a little more informal. The school's principal or assistant principals do three-minute walk-throughs of each classroom each week and provide immediate feedback if they believe it is needed. In addition, the principal meets with teachers once a week in their grade level team meetings to discuss any concerns or to work on professional development. Each team meets every day for planning purposes. The school also has two master teachers who assess teacher performance and work on strengthening areas where teachers might be weak. Finally, every teacher has an end-of-the-year assessment.

At New Orleans College Prep, teachers have a planning period every day from 4 to 5 p.m., and they collaborate with each other in teams. In addition, administrators review the lesson plans for all of the teachers. In terms of assessment, regular classroom observations are scheduled, and teachers get feedback from the administration and from their colleagues. KIPP Believe's principal and two deans serve as instructional coaches for the school's teachers. They meet weekly with the teachers, and every third week they observe the teachers in their classrooms. KIPP teachers also receive feedback from their peers.

Teaching in a charter school is exceptionally hard work. The days are long, the need for energy and creativity is great, and the attention to detail is mandatory. Teachers are expected to know each one of their students, their strengths and weaknesses, and how best to help them connect with the material. In such a demanding environment, a well-organized and implemented teacher support system is critical, and the best-run charter schools place as much emphasis on supporting their teachers as they do on educating their students.

Policy-focused governing boards

Best practices

- *Formal process for selecting new board members*
- *Diversity of skills among board members*
- *Clearly defined process for evaluating school leaders*
- *Succession planning*
- *Formal board training*

Every charter school is overseen by an independent board, rather than the local district school board. That makes the relationship between a charter school board and the school or schools it oversees a close, personal one. It also means that both the board and the school leader need to be clear about who is responsible for what. Other research has found that the relationship between the board and the school leader works best when the board focuses on overall policy matters and the school leader handles the day-to-day operation of the school.

In examining best practices among the charter school boards, the research literature suggests looking at whether there is a formal process for selecting board members, whether there is a formal process for evaluating the performance of the school leader, whether board members have engaged in succession planning, whether there is a diversity of skills among the board members and whether there is any formal training for board members.

In terms of the board member selection process, some of the schools have well-defined, formal processes in place, while others do not. The Lafayette Academy Charter School board, for example, does not have a formal process for selecting new members. Rather it focuses on choosing people "who are going to be like-minded to the cause." The board does have a diverse set of skills among its members, including expertise in the legal profession, the accounting profession, education, construction and others.

The International School of Louisiana, on the other hand, has a formal selection process for board members. First board members determine what type of candidate they need to fill an open slot. The goal is to select members with a variety of skills and experiences. After deciding what skills candidates should have, the governance committee checks with New Schools for New Orleans and its board bank for potential candidates, and it solicits nominations. The committee then selects some potential candidates, gives them a tour of the school, interviews them and explains the agreement they need to sign that spells out what they will be expected to do as board members. The committee then makes its recommendation to the whole board, which votes on the choice.

School leader performance evaluations and succession planning seemed to be problematic areas for the charter school boards in this study. Board members interviewed conceded it was difficult to develop an evaluation form that truly reflected the school leader's job. As a result, few of the boards had a formal evaluation process in place. Many board members indicated they were working on such a process. In the meantime, the school leader evaluation process tended to be fairly informal and handled primarily by the president or chairman of the school's board and perhaps the executive committee. Nor had most of the boards given much consideration to how they would fill the school leader's position when the time comes.

In terms of board training, only a few of the boards had any structured board development. At Belle Chasse Academy, for example, the board holds a retreat each year. In addition, board members listen to a 20-minute podcast from Brian Carpenter – a national authority on charter school governance – at each of their monthly meetings. It was not always that way. For the first couple of years of the school's operation, board members argued in public, micromanaged and otherwise intruded into the school day. By the third year of the school's existence, the principal and some of the board members began talking about the problems and out of that came the development process they use now.

A board member at another charter school has a different point of view about board development, however. He believes there is an overemphasis on board practices, and that discussions at board meetings can become more about the process than about the outcomes of the school. In his experience, boards generally fall into one of two camps when it comes to their meetings. Either the meeting is dominated by strategic thinking, long-term planning and meeting challenges, or it is mired in school finances. Ideally, he says, a board should alternate. One meeting should focus on strategy; the next should focus on finances; and board members should always keep a watchful eye on the school's outcomes vs. its stated mission.

In the short term, the lack of adherence to what are considered best practices for governing boards does not seem to have caused too many problems for the schools in this study. But for the longer term, as original founders and leaders move on, the boards will need to set up more formal procedures to handle such things as hiring and evaluating a school leader, filling open board slots and providing training for board members. In many ways, charter schools are similar to small business operations, and their boards should take a more businesslike approach to governance.

What can be replicated?

All of these best practices described here can be replicated in both traditional public schools and new charter schools. They are, however, labor-intensive and consume more resources than the practices typically found in traditional public schools. They also require strong commitment from leaders and administrators, and from governing board members.

The best practices identified here require a significant amount of organization and preparation before they can be implemented. Then they require ongoing monitoring and

adjustment. In addition, these best practices will only produce the desired results if every administrator, faculty member and staff member supports them and is diligent about following them. In other words, everyone has to buy in to the process for it to be successful.

In that sense, Louisiana's charter schools are better positioned to take advantage of these best practices than traditional schools are. For one thing, their administrators have the flexibility and autonomy needed to put these practices to work without having to maneuver around a large central office bureaucracy. For another thing, their teaching staffs tend to have more instructors who come from non-traditional educational backgrounds and who are not accustomed to one specific way of doing things. In addition, most of the charter schools in this study have substantial teacher development and support structures in place where teachers are encouraged to be innovative. Further, most of the charter schools in Louisiana tend to have small enrollments. That also makes it easier to implement these best practices.

It is not impossible for traditional public schools to do the same thing, however. One of the people interviewed for this study worked as a Teach for America corps member in both a traditional public school and a charter school and then took a job as a principal in a traditional public school. She has been able to put some of the best practices described above into effect because she has a sympathetic district superintendent, and she stepped into a situation in which most of the school's faculty was new. Specifically, she has been able to create a school culture that is more conducive to learning and to instill in her students an appreciation for higher achievement goals. In addition, she and her teachers have worked to set up a data-driven instruction system that they use to monitor and assess student progress.

The Recovery School District also has implemented a number of the best practices described here in its direct-run, or traditional, public schools. For instance, the Teacher Advancement Program is being set up in all of the RSD's elementary schools, which encompass pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. In addition, the RSD is lengthening the school day to increase instructional time and plans to set up a positive behavior rewards system for all students. The RSD also is working to allow more site-based decision making on the part of school leaders, and it is creating data-driven instructional structures to help improve academic achievement.

To implement most of these best practices on a large scale in a traditional school district, however, would require significant policy changes. Central offices would have to give up some of their control so that individual school leaders had the flexibility they needed to make site-based curriculum and personnel decisions. Union contracts governing seniority, tenure, length of work day and other things likely would have to be renegotiated, although that is not the case in New Orleans where the union contract was eliminated following Hurricane Katrina. And district teachers and administrators would have to be convinced that these best practices could have a substantive impact on student achievement. All of that is a hard sell.

The problem is that information about these practices tends to be exchanged primarily among those in the charter school community. At the same time, local school districts generally are suspicious of, if not hostile toward, charter schools. That makes it difficult to have any sort of conversation about which practices are working well and which lend themselves to replication in traditional public schools. In light of this, PAR makes the following recommendation:

Recommendation 1: The state Department of Education should create an advisory council to conduct ongoing analysis of best practices in Louisiana charter schools that can be replicated in traditional public schools and help develop guidelines for how these best practices might be implemented. Further, the council should prepare an annual report for dissemination among all local school districts.

Areas of concern

In addition to the information about best practices, the data gathered for this study revealed some problem areas for charter schools.

Funding

Charter schools in Louisiana are funded almost entirely through the state Minimum Foundation Program, but it is complicated. Types 1, 3 and 4 charter schools receive funding from the Minimum Foundation Program that is equal to the per-pupil MFP amount allocated to their local school districts. The money is sent to the local districts, which then pass it on to the charter schools. Type 5 charter schools also receive per-pupil funding equivalent to the local school district in which they operate, but the money is distributed through the Recovery School District.

Type 2 charter schools established before 2008, which are BESE charters, receive funding from a state General Fund appropriation. That money flows through the state Department of Education and BESE and may or may not be equal to the per-pupil amount given to the districts in which the Type 2 charter schools operate. There are eight such Type 2 charters in the state. In 2009, the Legislature revised the funding mechanism for Type 2 charter schools so that they receive the same per-pupil funding as their local school districts. That change, however, only applies to Type 2 charter schools established after 2008. Currently, three Type 2 charter schools fall into that category.

To calculate the MFP amount, the Department of Education uses a complex formula that takes into account a district's enrollment and the students who make up that enrollment (at-risk, special education, gifted and talented, etc.); the amount of revenue the local school district can contribute; and any funding needed for special purposes such as teacher pay raises.

In addition, most charter schools receive some federal money for students classified as Title I eligible or as special education. Title I funding is based on the proportion of a school's students defined as living in poverty. How much money the schools receive depends on how many students they have who fall into these categories. New charter schools also may apply for federal grant money designed to help offset their start-up costs. The grant money is given to the state and the state distributes it to eligible schools. In addition, charter schools in New Orleans have been the beneficiaries of hurricane recovery money to help repair damages caused by the storm. That funding, however, has ended.

Any additional money a charter school needs must come from individual fundraising efforts. A few of the schools in this study have fairly sophisticated fundraising operations, while others have hired or are in the process of hiring a development director to help them seek more donations and grants. And a few schools have simply decided that they will make do with whatever public money they receive.

The funding is an issue because it costs more to educate at-risk children. It takes a lot of resources to bring disadvantaged students up to grade level. An administrator with one charter school in New Orleans estimated that it costs more than $10,000 per student to educate his students, yet he receives about $7,800 per pupil in MFP money. While the school receives additional money from federal Title I and special education funds, it still is not enough to offset the cost. Therefore, the school has to make up the difference by raising private funds.

The problem with private fundraising is that some charter schools are better at it than others and some charter schools are more attractive to potential donors than others. That creates a big discrepancy in how much private money the schools can raise. Further, the sustainability of such private fundraising is questionable. Outside donors, in particular, eventually move on to other interests.

Another problem with the MFP is the perception of unfair funding levels, but the differences are a function of how the formula calculates per-pupil amounts. The result is that the amounts vary from school district to school district (see Table 2). MFP money consists of two components: a state portion that is set by BESE and calculated for every district using the same formula, and a local portion that is dependent on local sales tax revenue. The result is each district receives a different per-pupil amount. So, for example, charter schools in East Baton Rouge Parish will receive roughly $9,000 per student in MFP funding for 2009-2010, which is $1,200 more than the New Orleans charter schools will receive. The situation is even worse for a charter school in a parish like Avoyelles Parish, which receives about $6,500 per pupil in MFP money.

Facilities

Another problem area for charter schools is the question of facilities. Under the state's charter law, local school boards are required to make any vacant school facilities or any facilities expected to become vacant available to Types 1, 3 and 4 charter schools. In such an arrangement, the district maintains ownership of the building, but state law does not require the district to enter into a lease agreement with the charter school. Some districts, such as East Baton Rouge Parish, have set up leases with their charter school tenants. J.K. Haynes Elementary Charter School, for instance, leases its building from the East Baton Rouge district for $100 per year. Type 2 charter schools are expected to make their own arrangements for facilities, although they may contract with the local school district if space is available, and both parties are amenable. The situation is somewhat different for Type 5 charter schools. The RSD controls the facilities of the schools it takes over, and the Type 5 charters are given the use of those facilities.

In general, as the building owners, the districts are responsible for major maintenance, such as replacing a roof or an air conditioning system. The charter schools are responsible for all routine maintenance. However, determining what constitutes a major repair or replacement vs. what is considered routine maintenance is an ongoing point of contention for many districts and charter schools, and the situation is exacerbated both by the lack of lease agreements in many cases and by the lack of an overall state plan for facilities maintenance and capital improvements. Another problem some charter schools have faced is having the district follow through in a timely manner on an agreement to complete a major project. For instance, the Orleans Parish School Board has agreed that the New Orleans Charter Science and Math High School building needs a new roof and has agreed to pay for the project. However, work has yet to begin and the timeline for completion keeps being pushed back.

As in so many things related to education, Louisiana also ranks at the bottom when it comes to adequately funding facilities maintenance and school district capital improvement projects. Few school districts in Louisiana have any money at all for any capital improvements. Nor has the state provided the charter schools with any additional money to pay for capital projects.

As a result, those charter schools that need to renovate their buildings in order to bring them up to generally accepted standards or that want to expand their facilities to accommodate additional student growth or school activities must either raise extra money or take the funds out of their MFP allocation. Using MFP funds is problematic because under state law, all school systems are required to use 70 percent of their MFP funds on instructional activities that directly affect students. That limits the amount of money that might be available.

Further compounding the issue is the question of what happens if a charter school moves from its facilities. Does it simply forfeit all of the money it may have spent on improvements to the district that owns the building? Should the local district provide some reimbursement to the charter school? Neither of these questions has been addressed.

Community relationships

Community support is another important factor for charter schools, particularly when it comes to the Type 5 charter schools. The Type 5 charter schools are traditional public schools that were deemed failing by the state, taken over by the Recovery School District and converted into charters. As a result, there can be an emotional backlash from the surrounding neighborhoods because parents and students feel that their schools have been taken away from them.

That makes it important for charter school officials to build relationships with neighborhood residents, explain to them what the school is about and invite them in to see what is happening at the school. In fact, most of the charter schools in this study have open-door policies and encourage community members to come to their schools to see their operations firsthand.

But community outreach is about more than having an open-door policy. Charter school administrators must meet residents where they live. So, for example, in Baton Rouge, the new principal of Prescott Middle School and his teachers went door to door over the summer of 2009 to meet residents and business owners in the surrounding neighborhood. The work has paid off as word has spread among the community and enrollment is growing slowly. Administrators and faculty at Lafayette Academy Charter School are working to make their school a place that serves the entire community, not just students. When a neighborhood woman and her five children showed up at the school after having been evicted from their apartment, the staff found them a place to live, enrolled the older children in Lafayette Academy, and then helped the mother find a job.

In New Orleans, the charter schools' community outreach efforts, along with their academic focus, are having an impact. A recent poll commissioned by the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives shows support for charter schools is growing. A majority of respondents – 69 percent – said they believe charter schools have improved education in the city.

Transparency

Transparency refers to the ease with which the public can access information about charter schools in Louisiana. Although there have been improvements – among them the common application used by the RSD for all of the charter schools and direct-run schools under its supervision – the charter school landscape in Louisiana remains difficult for many parents to navigate.

The most comprehensive source of information is available only in New Orleans, where the Parent Organizing Network publishes the "New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools" each spring. It contains basic information about all public schools in the city – traditional and charter. The information includes each school's mailing address, phone number and Web address; a listing of each school's principal, charter operator and board chair, as well as the school's mission statement and registration process; and a snapshot of each school's enrollment and special program features. In addition, the guide gives parents step-by-step instructions about how to register for enrollment. The guide is also available online at the network's Web site, www.nolaparentsguide.org.

Some information is also available from the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization that provides an online directory of the state's charter schools. The information about each school is limited to address and phone number and a link to its Web site, if it has one. The LAPSC site (www.lacharterschools.org) also provides a brief overview and history of charter schools in Louisiana, a link to the text of the state statutes governing Louisiana charter schools and a list of frequently asked questions. In addition, the site is updated on a regular basis with links to recent news stories and reports about charter schools, as well as with information about related meetings and other events. The site also contains a

listing of the board meeting schedules for 58 of the state's charter schools, as well as information about the latest legislative action related to charter schools and a link to New Schools for New Orleans' charter school guidebook.

The state Department of Education's Office of Charter Schools also has a Web site (http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/charter/2624.html) that has copies of the charter school application forms; a copy of Bulletin 126, which explains how the state's charter school law is to be implemented; information about some start-up grant money that is available to new charter schools; and links to other charter school-related sites.

Finally, parents and others seeking information about charter schools also can turn to the individual schools' Web sites, but the quality of the sites varies markedly and a few of the 77 charter schools do not have a Web site. That makes it difficult for parents to gather all of the information they need to make an informed choice, and it skews the playing field toward those parents who already have the time, resources and knowledge to track down information.

Therefore, PAR has two recommendations to enhance the transparency of charter schools.

Recommendation 2: The state Department of Education should maintain a Web site with an accurate and easily accessible inventory of charter schools statewide, along with copies of their charters, amendments to those charters, the process for third-year performance evaluations and for charter renewals, and summary budget documents, to ensure maximum transparency in the expenditure of public dollars. In addition, the Web site should provide links to all of the charter schools' Web sites.

Recommendation 3: State law should require each charter school to have a Web site that provides such information as the school's physical address, phone number and name of a specific contact person; a list of administrators, faculty and staff, and their work contact information; a list of governing board members, and the time and place of all of their meetings for the school year; and the agendas for all board meetings so that parents and other interested parties will know ahead of time what is to be discussed. In addition, each school should provide a clear explanation of its admission requirements, if there are any, and a step-by-step explanation of how to register.

Conclusion

Two substantive questions remain unanswered in the ongoing charter school experiment in Louisiana. Are charter schools making significant, long-lasting improvements in their students' performance, and how sustainable are charter schools themselves?

On the question of how well charter schools are educating their students, the best way to gauge their performance would be to follow a cohort of students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Some data already exist from the state's original charter schools, i.e., those that have been in operation since before Katrina. Standardized test data (see Appendix A) indicate that most of these schools are helping their students reach state performance targets.

However, limited performance data exist for Type 5 charter schools, which is the category for takeover charter schools. It will take more time to determine whether the Type 5 charter schools are achieving their goals simply because the oldest ones only began operating in 2004-2005.

The sustainability of charter schools in the state also will depend on the resolution of some areas of ongoing concern, such as funding, facilities, community relationships and transparency.

One part of the solution may be the creation of small clusters, or networks, of charter

schools. The best known such network is the Algiers Charter Schools Association, which has nine schools on the West Bank of New Orleans. The association's small central office coordinates such things as transportation, food services, maintenance and human resources for all of the schools. In that way, the association is able to take advantage of economies of scale for needed services and give its principals more time to focus on curriculum and instruction. Other small networks in New Orleans include the four KIPP charter schools and the two FirstLine Schools (Green and Ashe charter schools). In addition, Advance Baton Rouge has four charter schools in East Baton Rouge Parish and one in Pointe Coupee Parish.

The charter school experiment is just underway in New Orleans and in Louisiana. The early indications are that it is succeeding in bringing student achievement up, but more time is needed before a definitive answer is available. The research here has identified some best practices that can help increase the chances for success among Louisiana's charter schools. Further, these best practices do not have to be unique to charter schools; they can be implemented in any school and in any district where a willingness to try new ideas exists. The state should take advantage of this opportunity and growing public support to encourage all public schools to examine which of these best practices might work for them.

Charter school proponents believe firmly that charter schools are not a panacea for what ails public education in Louisiana and the United States. However, the charter school model is a viable and valuable option in the arsenal of public school choices available to districts and parents and a valuable resource in developing and trying out new tools to break the cycle of poor student performance.

Appendix A. Louisiana Charter Schools, 2009-2010

School Name	School Location	Enrollment, October 2009	Grades served	Year opened	Charter operator	Charter authorizer	SPS 2006-2007	SPS 2007-2008	SPS 2008-2009
Type 1									
Children's Charter Elementary School [1]	Baton Rouge	237	PK-5	97/98	School for a New Millennium, Inc.	East Baton Rouge Parish School Board	89.3	86.4	84.6
Community School for Apprenticeship Learning	Baton Rouge	162	6-8	97/98	Community School for Apprenticeship Learning, Inc.	East Baton Rouge Parish School Board	60.3	70.6	76.2
Einstein Charter School	New Orleans	471	PK-8	06/07	Einstein Group, Inc.	Orleans Parish School Board	65.9*	84.8	85.3
J.K. Haynes Elementary Charter School [1]	Baton Rouge	214	PK-5	97/98	The J.K. Haynes Elementary Charter School	East Baton Rouge Parish School Board	86.7	84.8	86.7
Jefferson Community School [2]	Jefferson	12	6-8	96/97	Jefferson Coalition for Alternative Schools	Jefferson Parish School Board	46.3	51.4	61.0
Type 2									
Avoyelles Public Charter School	Mansura	684	K-12	00/01	Avoyelles Public Charter School, Inc.	BESE	98.3	99.2	107.7
Belle Chasse Academy [1]	Belle Chasse	847	K-8	02/03	Belle Chasse Academy, Inc.	BESE	99.0	102.8	104.0
Children's Charter Middle School [1]	Baton Rouge	40	6-7	08/09	School for a New Millennium, Inc.	BESE	N/A	N/A	N/A
D'Arbonne Woods Charter School	Farmerville	202	K-6	09/10	D'Arbonne Woods Charter School, Inc.	BESE	N/A	N/A	N/A
Delhi Charter School	Delhi	619	K-12	01/02	Delhi Charter School	BESE	105.8	106.1	107.1
V.B. Glencoe Charter School	Franklin	373	K-8	99/00	Glencoe Education Foundation, Inc.	BESE	91.5	97.3	105.1
The International School of Louisiana [1]	New Orleans	522	K-8	00/01	International School of Louisiana	BESE	99.2*	97.5	102.6
Madison Preparatory Academy	Baton Rouge	92	9-10	09/10	Community School for Apprentice Learning, Inc.	BESE	N/A	N/A	N/A
The MAX School [1]	Thibodaux	111	1-8	07/08	The Maxine Giardina Charter School, Inc.	BESE	N/A	N/A	60.7
Milestone SABIS Academy of New Orleans	New Orleans	396	K-8	03/04	Innovators in Milestones, Inc.	BESE	52.7*	69.4	74.2
New Vision Learning Academy	Monroe	352	PK-6	98/99	New Vision Learning Academy	BESE	90.9	94.6	101.8
Type 3									
Audubon Charter School	New Orleans	775	PK-8	05/06	French and Montessori Education, Inc.	Orleans Parish School Board	100.8*	108.9	109.8
Warren Easton High School	New Orleans	849	9-12	06/07	Warren Easton Charter Foundation	Orleans Parish School Board	64.7*	76.6	84.1

SOURCE: Louisiana Department of Education and *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools*

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Appendix A. Louisiana Charter Schools, 2009-2010 (continued)

School Name	School Location	Enrollment, October 2009	Grades served	Year opened	Charter operator	Charter authorizer	SPS 2006-2007	SPS 2007-2008	SPS 2008-2009
Type 3 (continued)									
Benjamin Franklin High School	New Orleans	609	9-12	05/06	Advocates for Academic Excellence in Education	Orleans Parish School Board	170.0*	165.2	167.5
Edward Hynes Charter School	New Orleans	500	K-8	06/07	Hynes Charter School Corp.	Orleans Parish School Board	94.3*	104.0	107.1
Lake Forest Charter Elementary School [1]	New Orleans	463	K-8	05/06	The Council for Quality Education	Orleans Parish School Board	111.7*	122.1	129.0
Lusher Charter School [1]	New Orleans	1,520	K-12	05/06	Advocates for Arts-Based Education	Orleans Parish School Board	129.2*	134.9	139.4
Robert Russa Moton Charter School	New Orleans	280	PK-7	06/07	Advocates for Innovative Schools, Inc.	Orleans Parish School Board	64.1*	90.8	97.6
New Orleans Science & Math Charter High School [1]	New Orleans	373	9-12	05/06	Advocates for Science and Math Education, Inc.	Orleans Parish School Board	70.4*	75.9	76.7
Priestley School of Architecture/ Construction	New Orleans	308	9-12	06/07	Priestley Charter School	Orleans Parish School Board	47.4*	42.9	51.1
Type 4									
Alice M. Harte Charter School	New Orleans	615	K-8	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/Orleans Parish School Board	69.9*	82.8	88.9
Edna Karr Charter High School	New Orleans	843	9-12	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/Orleans Parish School Board	85.0*	80.4	83.0
Lafayette Charter High School [2]	Lafayette	133	9-12	98/99	Lafayette Parish School System	BESE/Lafayette Parish School Board	44.6	50.6	55.8
Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences [1]	Bunkie	296	8-12	00/01	Avoyelles Parish School Board	BESE/Avoyelles Parish School Board	71.8	71.4	69.9
Type 5									
Abramson Science & Technology Charter School	New Orleans	491	K-11	07/08	Pelican Educational Foundation, Inc.	BESE/Recovery School District (RSD)	N/A	44.7*	66.2
Akili Academy of New Orleans	New Orleans	168	K-2	08/09	Akili Academy of New Orleans, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Algiers Technology Academy	New Orleans	347	9-12	07/08	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	N/A	41.5*	49.9
ARISE Academy @ Dr. Charles R. Drew Elementary	New Orleans	198	PK-2	09/10	ARISE Academy	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arthur Ashe Charter School [1]	New Orleans	241	K-8	07/08	FirstLine Schools, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	42.6*	67.2

SOURCE: Louisiana Department of Education and *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools*

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Appendix A. Louisiana Charter Schools, 2009-2010 (continued)

School Name	School Location	Enrollment, October 2009	Grades served	Year opened	Charter operator	Charter authorizer	SPS 2006-2007	SPS 2007-2008	SPS 2008-2009
Type 5 (continued)									
Martin Behrman Charter Academy for Creative Arts and Sciences	New Orleans	616	PK-8	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	82.3*	92.8	94.8
Pierre A. Capdau-UNO Charter Elementary School	New Orleans	426	K-8	04/05	New Beginnings School Foundation-Capital One-UNO Charter Network	BESE/RSD	54.1*	62.8	66.4
Capitol Pre-College Academy for Boys	Baton Rouge	213	9-12	08/09	100 Black Men of Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	39.3*
Capitol Pre-College Academy for Girls	Baton Rouge	184	9-12	08/09	100 Black Men of Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	42.4*
Crestworth Learning Academy	Baton Rouge	430	6-8	09/10	Crestworth Learning Academy	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Crocker Arts and Technology School	New Orleans	174	PK-3	08/09	Advocacy for the Arts and Technology in New Orleans, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
A.D. Crossman-Esperanza Charter School	New Orleans	332	K-8	07/08	Esperanza Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	N/A	45.2*	53.8
Dalton Elementary School	Baton Rouge	365	PK-5	09/10	Advance Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dwight D. Eisenhower Academy of Global Studies	New Orleans	594	PK-8	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	60.0*	66.7	69.5
William J. Fischer Accelerated Academy	New Orleans	451	PK-8	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	36.8*	62.0	60.4
Glen Oaks Middle School [1]	Baton Rouge	308	6-8	08/09	Advance Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	48.7*
Samuel J. Green Charter School [1]	New Orleans	460	K-8	05/06	FirstLine Schools, Inc.	BESE/RSD	44.9*	61.6	66.5
Langston Hughes Academy Charter School	New Orleans	488	K-7	07/08	NOLA 180, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	61.9*	64.7
Intercultural Charter School	New Orleans	296	K-6	08/09	The Intercultural Charter School Board, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	65.8
Kenilworth Science and Technology School	Baton Rouge	447	6-8	09/10	Pelican Educational Foundation, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School for Science and Technology	New Orleans	700	PK-10	06/07	Friends of King School	BESE/RSD	72.6*	89.1	91.4
KIPP Believe College Prep [1]	New Orleans	333	5-8	05/06	Knowledge is Power Program New Orleans	BESE/RSD	66.6*	98.6	97.2
KIPP Central City Academy	New Orleans	288	5-7	07/08	Knowledge is Power Program New Orleans	BESE/RSD	N/A	72.7*	75.9

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Appendix A. Louisiana Charter Schools, 2009-2010 (continued)

School Name	School Location	Enrollment, October 2009	Grades served	Year opened	Charter operator	Charter authorizer	SPS 2006-2007	SPS 2007-2008	SPS 2008-2009
Type 5 (continued)									
KIPP Central City Primary	New Orleans	195	K-1	08/09	Knowledge is Power Program New Orleans	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	114.6
KIPP McDonogh 15 School for the Creative Arts	New Orleans	480	PK-8	06/07	Knowledge is Power Program New Orleans	BESE/RSD	78.9*	94.4	88.8
Lafayette Academy Charter School [1]	New Orleans	778	PK-7	06/07	Choice Foundation	BESE/RSD	38.6*	59.1	63.8
Lanier Elementary School [1]	Baton Rouge	293	PK-5	09/10	Advance Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Linear Leadership Academy	Shreveport	271	6-8	09/10	Martin Luther King Neighborhood Association	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Linwood Public Charter School	Shreveport	655	6-8	09/10	Shreveport Charter School, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Thurgood Marshall-UNO Early College High School	New Orleans	377	9-12	06/07	New Beginnings School Foundation-Capital One-UNO Charter Network	BESE/RSD	54.1*	62.4	66.4
Benjamin E. Mays Preparatory School @ George W. Carver Elementary	New Orleans	140	PK-2	09/10	Benjamin E. Mays Preparatory School, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
McDonogh 28 City Park Academy	New Orleans	372	K-8	06/07	New Orleans Charter Schools Foundation	BESE/RSD	29.0*	48.5	56.6
McDonogh 32 Literacy Charter School	New Orleans	571	PK-8	06/07	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	33.8*	42.0	55.4
McDonogh 42 Elementary Charter School	New Orleans	527	PK-8	07/08	Treme Charter School Association	BESE/RSD	N/A	48.7*	61.9
Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business	New Orleans	388	6-7, 9-10	08/09	Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	67.7
Medard H. Nelson-UNO Charter School	New Orleans	413	PK-8	05/06	New Beginnings School Foundation-Capital One-UNO Charter Network	BESE/RSD	65.9*	66.1	63.7
New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy [1]	New Orleans	151	9-10	08/09	Advocates for Science and Math Education, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	81.6
New Orleans College Prep [1]	New Orleans	441	K-2, 6-8	07/08	New Orleans College Preparatory Academies	BESE/RSD	N/A	63.4*	67.0
Pointe Coupee Central High School	Morganza	385	9-12	08/09	Advance Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	33.1*

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Appendix A. Louisiana Charter Schools, 2009-2010 (continued)

School Name	School Location	Enrollment, October 2009	Grades served	Year opened	Charter operator	Charter authorizer	SPS 2006-2007	SPS 2007-2008	SPS 2008-2009
Type 5 (continued)									
Prescott Middle School [1]	Baton Rouge	279	6-8	08/09	Advance Baton Rouge	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	39.0*
Pride College Prep @ Francis W. Gregory Elementary	New Orleans	132	PK-2	09/10	Pride College Preparatory Academy	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
James M. Singleton Charter School	New Orleans	617	PK-8	99/00, 06/07	Dryades YMCA	BESE/RSD	35.7*	54.9	58.9
Success Preparatory Academy @ Albert Wicker Elementary	New Orleans	238	K-3	09/10	Success Charter School	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sojourner Truth Academy	New Orleans	183	9-10	08/09	Sojourner Truth Academy, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	N/A	56.0*
Harriet Ross Tubman Charter School	New Orleans	485	PK-8	06/07	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	41.3*	50.3	53.7
O. Perry Walker College and Career Prep High School and Community Center	New Orleans	857	9-12	05/06	Algiers Charter Schools Association	BESE/RSD	48.1*	49.2	55.9
Andrew H. Wilson Charter School	New Orleans	525	K-7	07/08	Broadmoor Charter School Board, Inc.	BESE/RSD	N/A	62.0*	62.3
Sophie B. Wright Charter School	New Orleans	348	5-10	05/06	Institute for Academic Excellence	BESE/RSD	60.9*	74.2	79.5

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