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Remaking Memphis: Charters, Choice, and Experimentation



Shelby County schools Superintendent Dorsey Hopson II reads a children's book to preschoolers at the Lowrance Elementary School in Memphis, Tenn. Mr. Hopson says all of the district's schools can benefit from more autonomy. —Timothy Ivy for Education Week

Array of strategies aims to transform Tennessee's largest district

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

Memphis, Tenn.

With a growing charter school sector, a new state-run district with plans to expand, and a reconfigured central office, Memphis is poised to become the next national center for New Orleans-style school governance.

Even as a commission spent the past two years planning for the largest school district merger in the nation's history—the former Memphis city district and an adjacent suburban system became the unified 140,000-student, 222-school Shelby County district on July 1—the landscape of governance within the legacy city school system was changing rapidly to favor parental choice and more autonomous schools.

The changes underway here include:

- A rapidly expanding array of charter schools. Home to just three charter schools 10 years ago, Memphis now has 41 charters, and more are on the way, including schools that will be part of some of the nation's best-known charter networks.
- A growing Achievement School District. The nation's second state-run school district, Tennessee's **Achievement School District** oversees 12 schools in the city and plans to run more than 50, most of them within Memphis, over the next five years.
- An "Innovation Zone." Created by the district as the analogue to the state-run district,

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the Innovation Zone, or I-Zone, encompasses 13 schools that have budget and hiring autonomy.

As a model for the Memphis efforts, district, charter, and state leaders are looking down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where the state-run Recovery School District has converted most of the public schools in the city to charter status. The goal is to create a "system of schools rather than a school system," said Bradley Leon, the new chief innovation officer for the Shelby County district.

"Our belief is that Memphis is poised to be either the first or among the first major urban centers to fully and deeply transform public education for all kids—in our case, without having had to suffer a hurricane to get there," said Barbara Hyde, the president of the Hyde Family Foundations, a philanthropy in Memphis that funds some of the efforts.



Eight-year-old Laniah Bowdery, front, waits with her classmates to perform at a reading assembly at Lowrance Elementary School in Memphis. Lowrance won state recognition this year for improving its students' reading and math scores.

—Timothy Ivy for Education Week

She referred to Hurricane Katrina, whose destructive path in 2005 opened the way for **an accelerated remake of the New Orleans school system**, where more than 80 percent of students now attend charter schools.

"We have an unprecedented alignment of human-capital partners, a pipeline of talent, demonstrated high-performing school models, and a pipeline of new charter schools coming into the city," Ms. Hyde said.

Setting the Scene

State and local policy changes over the past few years have cleared the way for some of the shifts in Memphis and helped draw the interest of charter operators around the country.

Then-Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, signed **Tennessee's First to the Top Act** into law in 2010, which created the Achievement School District. The same year, Tennessee received a federal Race to the Top grant that included funds for the ASD. A separate 2011 state law opened enrollment in charter schools to all students and removed the cap on the number of schools.

"The policy context in the state, with no cap on charters, no collective bargaining, and one of the best authorizers in the country [the ASD] means some of the best [charter operators] are saying, I want to come to Memphis," said Chris Barbic, the executive director of the ASD.

Teachers in the Shelby County district also work in an altered policy environment: Collective bargaining was repealed in 2011; a 2013 state law requires teachers and principals to mutually agree on whether or not a teacher would work at a given school; and Tennessee teachers' evaluations are now tied to their students' scores on the state exams. The merged district has also moved away from seniority-based hiring.

Those changes have made the city fertile ground for the expansion of alternative-certification programs like Teach for America and Teach Memphis, according to Athena Turner, the executive director of Teach for America in Memphis.

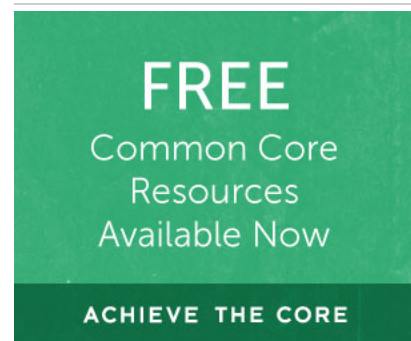
Benjamin Fenton, the founder of New Leaders, a New York City-based group that trains aspiring principals and consults on school and district leadership, said the district's focus on school-level leadership, and philanthropic investment from local and national foundations, had brought his organization to the city in 2004 and opened the doors for others since.

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The state also sent a signal by hiring Mr. Barbic, the founder of the Houston-based YES Prep charter network, to oversee the Achievement School District schools.

A Proof Point

Mr. Barbic said that Shelby County's schools would prove the benefits of school choice, both for families and for teachers, enabling them to choose the best school from a range of operators. He said he imagines district-run Memphis-area schools and the ASD working together in "co-opetition"—friendly competition—to improve.

Dorsey Hopson II, the district's new superintendent, is equally enthusiastic about the potential for dramatic change. "If we could give all of our schools the autonomy that the I-Zone has and the ASD has and the charter schools have—I think it'd be a recipe for success," he said.

Meanwhile, the [merger of the Memphis and Shelby County districts](#) opened up opportunities for conversations about just how the central office should be structured. Some 300 out of 1,000 central-office jobs were cut in the resulting reorganization, according to Mr. Hopson.

"When [the merger] started, initially it felt like a mess. But it turned out to be an extraordinary opportunity to throw everything up in the air and look at how to create a whole new system," said Ms. Hyde.

The changes are not uncontroversial, though.

[Standing Together for Strong Community Schools](#), a nonprofit group in the state, views the state-run district and the growing charter sector as a move away from local control. Its members protest what their website describes as "well-funded special interests intent on dismantling our school systems, diverting public money from public schools, and limiting the voice of Tennessee citizens in shaping education policy through our local elected school boards."

The ASD and the district's I-Zone share the goal of raising the 69 Memphis schools that ranked in the state's bottom 5 percent on state standardized tests into the top 25 percent of schools, and both began taking charge of schools last school year after receiving an infusion of money from the state.

The ASD functions as an authorizer for six schools in the city and operates an additional six Memphis schools as "achievement schools," which are run as though they were a separate charter-management organization within the ASD. The achievement schools took over a feeder pattern of schools in Frayser, a particularly troubled area of the city.

Each school in the achievement district is required to accept all students who had previously been zoned to the school. The rule means charter operators must prove that they can show strong results without "creaming" students, or somehow enrolling an easier-to-teach group of students than the regular public schools do.

Where Are These Schools Located?

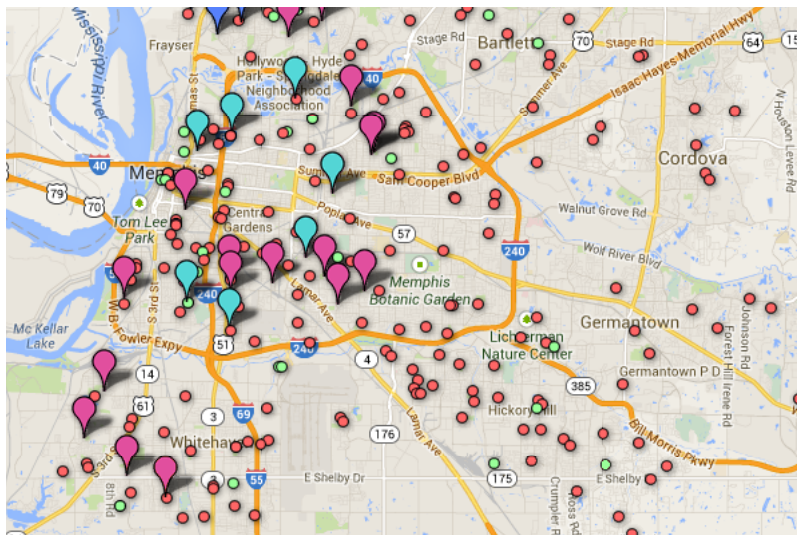
Use the Google Map below to explore the Memphis school district, including its I-Zone schools, as well as the area's charter and achievement schools. (Map by Doris Nhan)

Innovation Zone

Prominent national charter operators, including YES Prep and the Oakland, Calif.-based Aspire, plan to open schools within the ASD in the next few years.

Mr. Barbic said he anticipates that by 2016, the ASD will run as many as 53 schools—most of them in Memphis—and serve as many as 19,000 students.

The 13 schools in the district's I-Zone are granted some of the same budget and hiring autonomy as a charter school or a school in the ASD. Once a school becomes part of the



I-Zone, every teacher must reapply for his or her job. Some schools in the zone have an extended school day, and principals can select which interventions they'd like to use in their schools.

Antonio Burt, who is in his second year as the principal of Ford Road Elementary School, in the Westwood community, said the flexibility allowed him to blend various strategies he'd learned in New Leaders trainings and from colleagues around the country.

His school has an extended school day and a schedule that changes every few weeks to allow for longer blocks of instruction. "The I-Zone helped us maneuver around some red tape," Mr. Burt said.

Despite the longer workday and an atmosphere Mr. Burt proudly described as competitive, the school lost just two teachers last year and was recognized as among the state's most-improved schools.

While the state-run district can technically take over any school in the bottom 5 percent, Mr. Barbic said the ASD hosted community meetings and worked with the regular school district to determine which schools should be taken over.

Superintendent Hopson said that the regular district had been able to keep some schools under its own authority.

"Whenever we've said, hey, for community reasons or historic reasons, we would like to run these schools, and put these schools in our I-Zone, the response has always been, well, show me what your plan is," he said.

The I-Zone schools showed some of the highest gains on reading and math tests in the state last year, higher than both the rest of the district and the ASD. Helping parents navigate the mix of choices in the district is challenging, however.

Changing Landscape

Greg Thompson, the executive director of the Tennessee Charter School Center, which incubates and advocates for charter schools, said his organization was working on a website that would help parents understand what schools are available to them.

But Beverly Goliday, who has six grandchildren in the district, said that at this particular moment, "it is very complicated to find a school."

Although the expansion of the charter schools in other districts, including Philadelphia, has led some district leaders to raise concerns, Mr. Hopson is optimistic.

"Obviously, as more charters come online, enrollment in the district's going to go down," he said. "But the main focus or issue should be on making sure we have as many good schools as possible."

He said there were still some details to work out: For instance, he said, state funding

should change to reflect the district's expenses in administering charter schools.

Still, the pace of change isn't slowing anytime soon, both because of the expansion of the ASD and the I-Zone and because of a forthcoming wrinkle in the merger: Six suburban districts in the area are expected to vote to create their own school boards and separate from the merged system this fall.

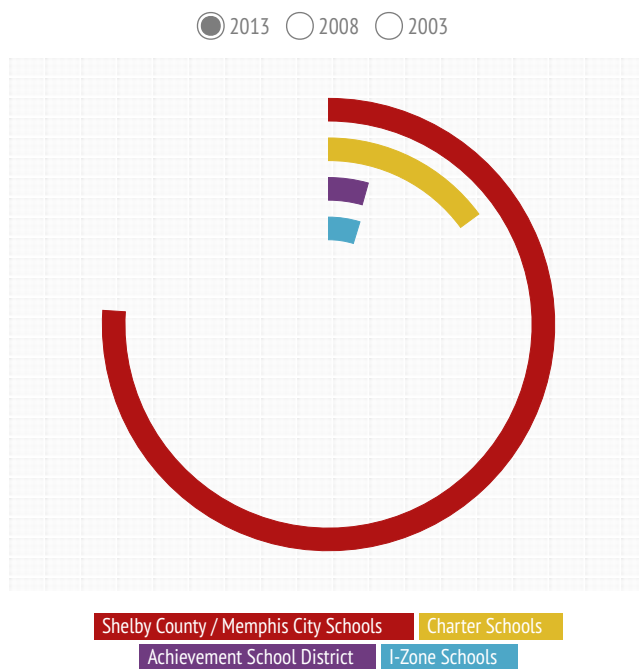
With that prospect looming, the merged Shelby County district does not yet know whether it will have 80,000, 100,000, or 140,000 students in the next school year. That uncertainty "keeps us on our toes," Mr. Hopson said.

Shifting Mix of Schools

The Memphis school district officially merged with the neighboring Shelby County school system in July. But the portfolio of schools across both districts has been growing increasingly diversified for at least 10 years.

The introduction of newer types of schools began with charter schools, which are public schools that are allowed to operate free from many of the usual school regulations. The state-run Achievement School District later took over 12 of the region's lowest-performing schools, all of them in the city of Memphis.

Also, the unified district runs an Innovation Zone, or I-Zone, which includes 13 schools that all have budget and hiring autonomy.



Source: Shelby County district, Tennessee Department of Education

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 Shifting Mix of Schools | Infographics

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- "[Tennessee's 'Race to Top' Professional Development Scrutinized](#)," (Teacher Beat Blog) Dec. 6, 2012.
- "[New Orleans Schools Seize Post-Katrina Momentum](#)," August 25, 2010.

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Jim Horn
1:52 PM on October 9, 2013

What you did not mention, nor has the local media, is the \$212 million donut hole that will be created in the local public education budget, as money goes to pay local and out-of-state corporate operators to run charter schools. The following quote is from the Transition Planning Commission Report issued in June 2012:

A system with multiple school operators (e.g. District, ASD and charter schools) inherently costs more to operate due to loss of scale with fixed costs being allocated across a smaller volume of students. This multi-operator environment is in place today and is projected to expand irrespective of the merger. To date, the districts have found creative ways to manage the increased costs of the existing multi-operator system (e.g. cutting or shifting 400+ positions out of the General Fund to right-size staff). However, with the projected share of students in non-district operated schools expanding rapidly in the next few years—from approximately 4% in FY2012 to 19% by FY2016 (equivalent to approximately \$212M of revenues shifted to charter schools and the ASD in FY2016)—it is critical to implement strategic cost management to ensure each pathway in the Multiple Achievement Paths model is financially equitable to students. The majority of these enrollment shifts are projected to happen irrespective of the merger, and the increased cost of the system is not the "fault" of the district or charter schools. Although merged SCS will continue to be responsible for managing most of these costs, other operators will also contribute as participants who benefit from this overall system (p. 168).

Score: 0

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