

THE RETURN MODEL

A New Approach to Governance for Public Schools in New Orleans

Executive Summary

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, public education in New Orleans has made improvements that were almost unimaginable before the storm. Test scores are up, graduation rates are higher and New Orleans students are closing the achievement gap with their peers in the rest of the state.¹ Yet, the system within which these improvements have occurred is temporary, established by the Legislature as an interim measure.

Currently there are two entities responsible for governing public schools in New Orleans: the Orleans Parish School Board and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, through the state's Recovery School District. Both entities charter schools, operate traditional, direct-run schools and allocate resources among schools.

Unlike anywhere else in the country, the majority of schools in New Orleans are charter schools, with more than 70% of students attending a charter school.

In 2010, the non-profit Educate Now! convened a task force to discuss future, long-term governance alternatives for New Orleans public schools. In a series of meetings over several months, the members of the Task Force considered how to sustain the academic progress that has occurred since 2005 within a coherent, enduring system that restores local control of public education.

The Task Force first developed a vision for governance and the principles that any governance model should embody. It next identified the functions that government must perform in New Orleans' unique, decentralized system of schools. Finally, the Task Force studied a variety of governance options, including returning schools to a traditional school board, as well as various ways of allocating responsibilities among two or more entities. It assessed each option based on its potential to achieve the vision of what good governance should provide while adhering to the agreed upon set of principles. The Return Model was developed as a result of these deliberations.

If implemented, the Return Model would:

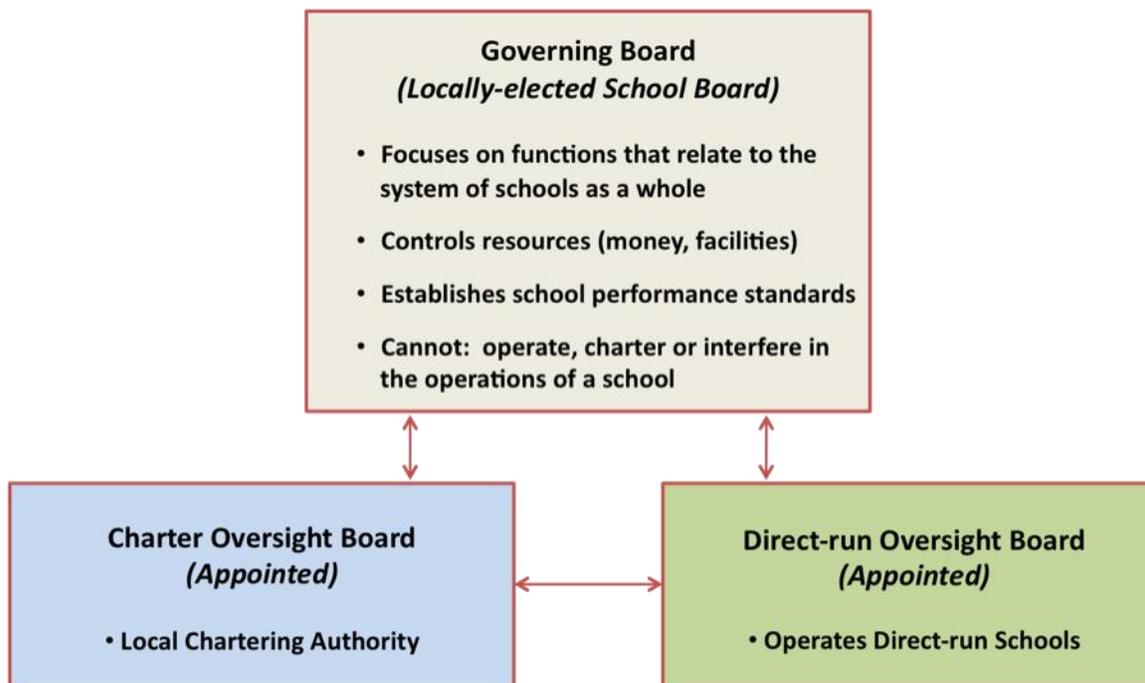
- Restore overarching political authority for all Orleans Parish public schools to a governing board elected by the citizens of New Orleans
- Return to local control the portfolio of public schools that, since Hurricane Katrina, has been managed by the state through its Recovery School District

¹ For information on gains in student academic performance see 1) the Louisiana Department of Education's March 2011 report "The Recovery School District - Louisiana's Turnaround Zone: Answering the Urgency of Now" and 2) Educate Now!'s analysis of the May 2011 test scores, which can be found at www.educatenow.net.

- Support the autonomy of charter schools, now the city’s dominant school type
- Provide the coordination necessary to serve the needs of all students
- Create a governance structure focused on quality schools

The Return Model differs sharply from the pre-Katrina approach to administering public education in New Orleans. Instead of vesting all power in a single board operating through a central office, a governance structure that failed to produce academically successful schools, the Return Model allots these powers and responsibilities among three interdependent boards:

- An elected Governing Board would have overarching responsibility for the school system as a whole and would be responsible for managing the system’s finances and school facilities, planning for the system as a whole, developing standards and policies for matters with system-wide implications, including school quality, and providing the coordination necessary to serve the needs of all students and the public. The Governing Board would be the Orleans Parish School Board with a redesigned and more clearly articulated scope of authority and responsibility.
- An appointed Direct-run Oversight Board would oversee the operation of all non-charter schools, whether currently managed by the Recovery School District or the Orleans Parish School Board.
- An appointed Charter Oversight Board would authorize and monitor the performance of charter schools.



In the Return Model, this division of powers would be accompanied by a system of checks and balances and specific measures to foster coordination and communication when appropriate.

Why this model versus a single board? There are a number of reasons:

- The key reason is to avoid the inherent conflict of interest built into a system in which a single board directly manages some schools, is responsible for chartering schools that will compete with these directly-run schools, and then must fairly set policy and allocate

resources between the schools it directly operates and its charters. It is like asking a coach to fairly referee a game his team is playing.

This structure avoids favoritism and conflicts of interest in the allocation of resources, including both money and facilities by separating resource management from the businesses of running individual schools or authorizing charters.

It also requires that the policies and rules set by the Governing Board apply equally to all schools- charter and direct-run.

- To protect school autonomy, the Return Model prohibits the Governing Board from getting involved in an individual school's budget, personnel, curriculum, salaries, school calendar, food service, transportation or contracts.
- To make certain all students are served equitably and inclusively, including students with disabilities and mid-year enrollees, the Governing Board would oversee the common enrollment process and have the power to enact needed policies to create a fair and transparent process.
- To keep the focus on creating and supporting quality, effective schools, each board would have explicit responsibilities and areas of accountability:
 - The Direct-run Oversight Board would be responsible for operating the direct-run schools well. It would not have another mission.
 - The Charter Oversight Board would be responsible for having high quality charter operators. It would not have another mission.
 - The Governing Board would be responsible for overall system performance. The Return Model gives autonomy to charter schools and the Direct-run Oversight Board. It is the Governing Board's responsibility to balance this autonomy with robust accountability that applies equally to charter and direct-run schools. The Governing Board would set minimum school performance standards and report on school performance. It would also have the power to require either Oversight Board to take corrective action when one of its schools is not meeting the standards and would have the option to close a poorly performing school or transfer it to the other Oversight Board.

This report presents the governance system that the Task Force developed. Not every detail is attended to, and Educate Now! expects and invites community debate that will further refine the model or build upon it to develop an even better alternative.