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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

U.S. NEWS | September 29, 2013, 10:39 p.m. ET

# Inside the Nation's Biggest Experiment in School Choice

By STEPHANIE BANCHERO

NEW ORLEANS—Kenisha Nelson tried to walk her son Kaleb into his new elementary school, Akili Academy, but the third-grader slipped from her hand and bolted to the front door. "I got this, mom," he said.

The first day of school turned out to be the easiest leg of Ms. Nelson's journey through the nation's largest experiment in school choice. She had searched since winter for the best campus with open spots for her 8-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter.

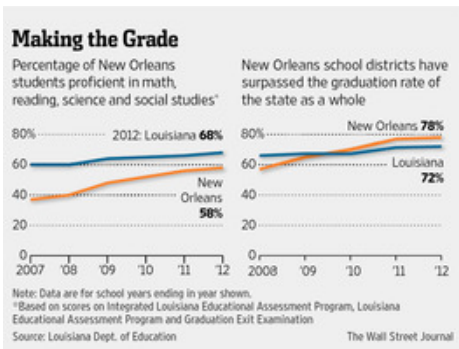


Kenisha Nelson reviewed homework with her son Kaleb, who started at Akili Academy this year for third grade. His previous school, Benjamin E. Mays, was closed for failing to meet state testing goals. Ms. Nelson started working in February to choose a new school for Kaleb.

In the end, she said, "it was a great outcome and worth missing those days at work and running around to schools to find good ones."

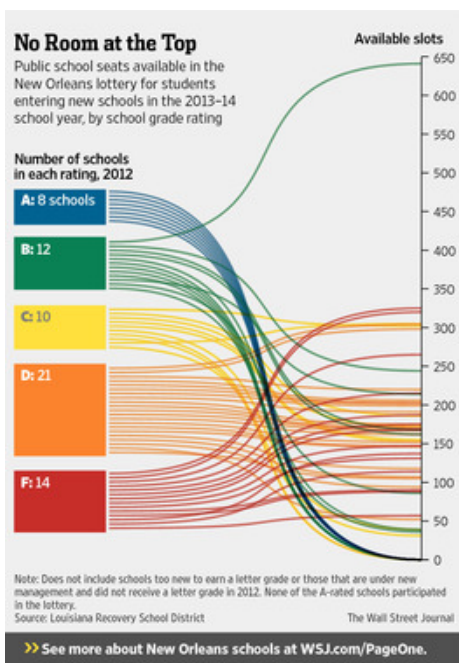
There is broad acknowledgment that local schools are performing better since Hurricane Katrina washed away New Orleans' failing public education system and state authorities took control of many campuses here.

Graduation rates went to 78% last year from 52% before Katrina—surpassing Detroit, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, Calif., cities also struggling to boost achievement among lower-income students. The share of New Orleans students proficient in math, reading, science and social studies increased to 58% in 2012 from 35% before the 2005 storm, state data shows.



School officials now want to ramp up improvements, saying the city's education marketplace still needs work. The enrollment system is complicated. There are far fewer available seats at good schools than at poor ones, leaving many families to choose between bad and worse. And few students can get into top-rated schools because of limited seats and strict admissions policies.

Boosters, including Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal, say New Orleans points to the future of public education.



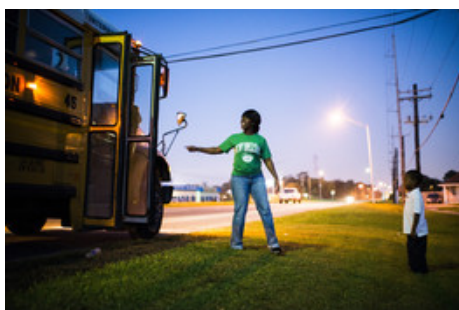
Giving parents a choice of schools, they say, fosters competition that weeds out badly run campuses. Academically, New Orleans is improving faster than any school district in Louisiana.

"I think the devastation of Katrina brought a lot of eyes to New Orleans and it brought in a lot of new people who want to make changes and do the right thing for our kids," said Leslie Hunter, whose son and daughter attend high school here. "It might not be perfect, but at least people are finally trying to do something to make it better."

Many parents say it takes extra effort to find an acceptable campus. "If parents want a good school for their kids," said Ms. Nelson, a 36-year-old single mother, "they have to take a stand and do all the work themselves."

Leslie Jacobs, a businesswoman who served on the state board of education and helped guide the schools overhaul, said New Orleans has built a foundation for better schools since the hurricane. "Now we are entering into phase two, where we need to build a more sophisticated model," she said. "The next few years will be the bigger push up the hill."

State Schools Superintendent John White, who arrived in Louisiana two years ago, supports the idea of public education as a marketplace but said the New Orleans system had lacked order. "Government needs to be here for equity of resources, equity of access and equity of

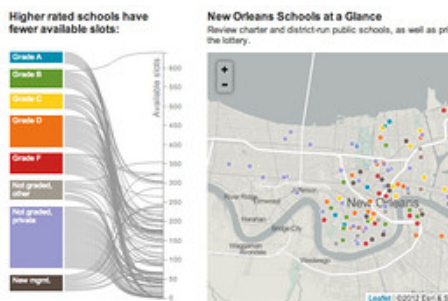


Kenisha Nelson stands with her son Kaleb, right, after putting Kaleb on the bus in New Orleans at the beginning of the school year.



Ava Howard, 28, right, rested with her four children at the annual Schools Expo held in the Superdome in February, where parents can learn about enrollment options.

See information on all public schools in New Orleans plus the private schools that participate in the lottery.



outcomes," said the 37-year-old former executive of Teach for America and former deputy chancellor of New York City Schools.

[More photos and interactive graphics](#)

Most of the city's schools were failing

long before Katrina destroyed dozens of campuses. The storm killed at least 1,800 people and displaced about 65,000 students, mostly low-income African Americans.

The Orleans Parish School Board fired its teachers after the storm, and the state board of education took control of all but the 13 best schools, which remain under the local board.

The state converted most of the campuses into charter schools, which hired their own nonunion teachers. Today, more than a quarter of the instructors are from Teach for America, a national teacher training program that recruits college graduates from around the U.S.

Since Katrina, the average teacher salary in New Orleans has risen slower than the state average but in 2011 was 20% higher than before the storm: \$47,878 compared with the statewide average of \$49,246, state data shows.

New Orleans, which previously spent about the same as other Louisiana districts, tallied about \$13,000 per pupil in 2011, compared with the state spending average of \$11,000 that year, according to state data. The city spent \$8,000 per pupil before Katrina, records show.

Denver, Chicago and Cleveland have embraced school choice on a smaller scale, but none give as much freedom—to parents and campuses—as New Orleans does: About 84% of its 42,000 public school students attend charters, the largest share of any district in the U.S.

Charter schools are largely free to manage their own budgets and hiring, set curriculum and schedules, and select textbooks. The lowest performing schools are eventually closed by state officials or replaced with new operators.

For the school year that started in August, parents picked among 78 charter schools, as well as eight traditional campuses, one independent school with a board appointed by the governor and 38 private schools that are paid with state-issued tuition vouchers. To help guide the selection, public schools are issued grades of A to F, based on academic performance.

Despite the city's rapidly improving student test scores, most schools are still far from earning top ratings, limiting parent choices.

Of the nearly 12,300 slots available in the citywide lottery for this school year, 20% were in schools rated F in 2012, 29% in D schools, 11% in C schools, 14% in B schools and none in A schools, according to an analysis by The Wall Street Journal. Among the open seats were ungraded schools that previously had D and F ratings but recently changed operators.

Complicating results in the education marketplace, some families haven't used their choices as expected: Nearly 35% of the approximately 6,700 students applying to transfer or enroll at a public school for the fall semester selected either D- or F-graded schools as their first pick, the Journal found.

For New Orleans parents, the school-choice system adds a level of involvement well beyond getting children dressed, fed and out the door in time. In applying for a new school, many families take into account such factors as the distance from home and work, where siblings are enrolled, the availability of after-school care and campus safety, in addition to academic ratings.

Jennifer Nin's 8-year-old son has already attended three schools, looking for the best educational fit. He now attends Akili Academy of New Orleans, where, Ms. Nin said, he is "thriving and loving it" after two years at less-than-desirable schools.

"I like knowing that I have the freedom to decide where my son goes to school," Ms. Nin said. "It gives me the power to pick something better for him."

Parents are empowered to vote with their feet, though it can be a slow and rocky path, with thousands of children spending a year or more at F schools.

Nika Burns this spring decided to keep her two sons at a school that carried an F grade last school

year, even though there were higher-rated schools closer to home. Her children objected to a move, she said, because "they feel loved and nurtured and cared for" at William J. Fischer Accelerated Academy. She also worried about the boys keeping up academically at another campus.

Ms. Burns' daughter, on the other hand, was accepted at a B-graded high school. "It's not just about pulling kids out of F schools and moving them around," she said. "You have to think about what's best for the child."

The application process is made more complicated because parents don't know the number of open seats expected at schools each year. Parents earlier this year made selections not knowing, for example, that only three 3rd-grade seats were open at B-rated schools in the lottery for fall.

Luck also plays a role in the schools marketplace. Student applications are randomly assigned a number that helps determine admissions in rank order.

None of New Orleans' eight A-rated schools—all charter schools under the control of the local school board—participated in the citywide lottery. The board voted last year to force the charters into participating when their licenses come up for renewal, which for some is as long as a decade away.

Aesha Rasheed, a community activist who created a popular school guide explaining admission requirements, said that after Katrina, parents were "put in charge of their children's education and sent out to navigate a complex system where not all schools played fair."

For Ms. Nelson, the quest began in February, at the annual Schools Expo held in the Superdome. Ms. Nelson, who lost her husband four years ago in a homicide, needed to find schools for two of her three children. "It's so overwhelming," she said, moving through the crowd past display tables.

Authorities were closing the school where her son Kaleb attended—the F-rated Benjamin E. Mays—for repeatedly failing to meet state testing goals. Ms. Nelson also needed a high school for her daughter, Kaylan, who was entering ninth grade. Her youngest son was in preschool.

The pressure triggered nightmares, Ms. Nelson said, of her daughter landing at a violent school and her son stuck in the principal's office for hyperactivity. Ms. Nelson moved Kaleb to the Mays charter school three years ago, she said, because his kinetic nature didn't mesh with his previous charter school's strict discipline.

Kaleb, who earned A's in second grade at Mays, said teachers there let him take short "brain breaks," to play basketball or help in the principal's office, when he got antsy.

Ms. Nelson applied to five schools for Kaleb and three for Kaylan. The citywide application allows for as many as eight schools per student. New Orleans parents apply to three, on average. Ms. Nelson said she selected only the schools she wanted.

Of the 21 public high schools in the lottery, just six were rated above D. Kaylan Nelson applied to one B-rated high school and one C-rated, competing with more than 1,400 eighth-graders for 150 open 9th-grade seats at the two campuses.

For Kaleb, Ms. Nelson selected Benjamin Franklin Elementary Math and Science, a B-rated school. But the choice was doomed from the start. Though Ms. Nelson didn't know it, Franklin had no openings for 3rd-grade. Her other four choices were a C-rated charter and three private schools.

In May, Kaleb was assigned to his second choice, Upperroom Bible Church Academy, a private school. Ms. Nelson said she liked the school when her daughter had briefly attended before Katrina. But just 21% of voucher students passed state exams last school year at Upperroom.

Later in May, Ms. Nelson was notified that Upperroom was barred from accepting new voucher students because of the school's poor exam results. In July, Kaleb was in the next round of the lottery and Ms. Nelson selected Akili Academy, a C-rated charter school that officials said had openings in third grade.

Ms. Nelson learned in July, a month before school started, that her son was admitted. After his first day, Kaleb's teacher phoned Ms. Nelson to say the boy was smart and attentive. "I nearly cried with relief," she said.

Initially, Ms. Nelson's daughter didn't get into either school she had selected in the lottery. In spring, Ms. Nelson made several visits to McDonogh 35 High School, a storied campus that was the first public high school in Louisiana for African Americans, pushing school officials to enroll her daughter. It holds a C grade. In July, she learned a slot opened for her daughter.

State officials say they are working to bring better order to the marketplace, opening "family resource centers" to help parents navigate the choice system, for example. Mr. White initiated the citywide lottery system two years ago.

This year, for the first time, the lottery incorporated private schools that accept state vouchers. A few high-rated public schools run by the local board also participated for the first time but dropped out after the first round, returning to a selection process controlled by individual principals. School board officials said those schools would return to the lottery next year.

Kathy Riedlinger, chief executive of the Lusher Charter School—which is under local board authority—said the campus doesn't participate in the lottery because the centralized admissions system usurps school autonomy. Lusher, located a few blocks from Tulane and Loyola universities on the east bank of the Mississippi River, has the highest ranked K-12 program in the state.

On a school day last semester, a class of third-graders stroked violins and cellos as their music teacher led them on a baby grand piano. They were in a new \$2 million arts wing, named for the Bill Goldring family, whose foundation donated \$500,000 to help build the center. Mr. Goldring is chairman of the Sazerac Co., one of the largest distilling companies in the U.S.

School officials say its success comes from an active parents group, a veteran teaching staff and a rich curriculum. Its demographics are also unique: Citywide, 88% of students are African-American and 83% are low-income; a third of Lusher's students are black, and a fifth are low-income.

Lusher gives admissions priority to children who live in the neighborhood, have siblings at the school or have a parent who works at Tulane.

Other students, including those from outside the neighborhood, must take an admissions exam and enter a campus lottery for the remaining seats. This year, 1,336 of these students applied for 152 open seats, officials said.

Many parents have complained they have little chance to enroll their children in Lusher or other A-rated schools. They say the schools erect barriers in what is supposed to be an open marketplace.

Ms. Riedlinger said her school's selection process was fair and that it was "a major distraction to keep fighting over who gets into Lusher. The question should be: Why can't we create more like Lusher."

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*A version of this article appeared September 29, 2013, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Inside the Nation's Biggest Experiment in School Choice.*

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