



LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

August 23, 2015

Dear Supporters of New Orleans Schools and Children,

This morning the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by a business journalism professor from New York City critical of changes undertaken in the New Orleans public school system in the ten years since Hurricane Katrina.

The 10th anniversary of the storm is an important moment for openness and reflection. I think about not just how much New Orleans has improved life opportunity for its children, but also how much is left to be done. There is room for both pride and humility.

In our openness to critique, however, we should respect the hundreds of thousands of principals, teachers, parents, and students who have dedicated their lives, prior to Katrina and afterward, to making New Orleans an even better place to grow up. We can accept that we have improvements to make, but not at the cost of diminishing the efforts of people in New Orleans.

I write today because I do not believe *Times* piece achieves this balance. Instead the author intentionally obscures evidence of real progress. A more constructive assessment of accomplishments and challenges is needed.

If you wish to parse the specifics of the author's inaccuracies, you can find a thorough fact checking of her writing on this subject, including today's piece, [here](#).

To provide a more balanced perspective, I ask four questions below that the author of the *Times* piece answers with omission and half-truth, following each with a representation of the facts.

Who is the New Orleans public school system of today?

There are approximately 47,000 public school children in New Orleans, 85 percent of whom are African-American and 83 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. Within schools overseen by the Recovery School District (RSD), 93 percent are African-American, and 4 percent are Latino. More than 92 percent hail from low-income households. RSD schools serve the most challenged students in a city and state whose socioeconomic challenges are no secret to anyone.

Educators in New Orleans are as diverse as is the city generally. In RSD schools, for example, 53 percent are African-American; 43 percent are white. More than half of school principals are African-American, and the superintendents of both the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and RSD are African-American men raised in the New Orleans area.

New Orleans schools are managed by non-profit organizations overseen by boards of local volunteers. Of the community members sitting on these boards, more than half are African-American.

Louisiana Believes



LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In New Orleans a family's ZIP code need not define its choice of school. Of families enrolling in new schools this year, 89 percent did so through a citywide enrollment system called OneApp. Three quarters of these families received one of their top three school choices. Among families prioritizing schools within their local neighborhoods, 96 percent received a local neighborhood school.

How does a system of charter public schools protect the most vulnerable students?

OneApp allows the government to guarantee an open enrollment system, limiting opaque admissions policies that may bias against some children. That same commitment to fairness is reflected in a centralized expulsion and transfer process, requiring school district approval anytime a student exits a school. Since adopting this central process, New Orleans schools have decreased expulsions every year and now expel students at a rate that is below the state average.

This system of managed enrollment and expulsion protects all students, including those with disabilities. Prior to Katrina, 11 percent of students with disabilities performed at the "basic" level on state tests. In 2014, that figure was 39 percent. The New Orleans high school graduation rate for students with disabilities now exceeds the state average by 17 percentage points.

Are students experiencing greater life opportunity in this system?

Prior to the storm, when only students with the strongest academic records elected to take the ACT, New Orleans students averaged a score of 17. Today, though all students are required to take the test, irrespective of academic record, the average has increased to 18.9. African-American students in New Orleans exceed the national average for African-American students.

The city's on-time high school graduation rate has similarly increased, from 54 percent in 2005 to 73 percent last year. Seventy-six percent graduate in five years, exceeding the state average, and the graduation rate for black students exceeds the national average.

The percentage of seniors attending college has increased from little more than a third in 2004 to half of seniors today. And more graduates are qualifying for state-funded, merit-based college scholarships: 25 percent in 2004 to 37 percent today.

A peer-reviewed study of academic gains in New Orleans, conducted by Tulane economists and glossed over the *Times* piece, compared the performance of New Orleans students with that of other hurricane-affected students, concluding that "we are not aware of any other districts that have made such large gains in such a short period of time."

What other challenges persist in New Orleans schools?

Louisiana Believes



LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

There remain humbling challenges. Too few young children in New Orleans partake in quality child care, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs. The managers of these programs must come together in a unified network of choices for families, providing care for any young child whose family seeks it.

As across the country, too many teachers leave the profession early in their careers. New Orleans schools, non-profits, and colleges of education must develop seamless professional ladders from undergraduate years through advanced stages of a teacher's career, just as the city must continue to improve its schools so that teachers can viably choose to send their own children to public schools.

And within our state and city remain far too many young adults disconnected from education and the workplace. New Orleans schools must work with industry and colleges to develop pathways for students that lead to credentials valued in today's workplace.

While the author of the *Times* piece is suspicious of parental choice and educator autonomy, having worked in urban school systems across America, I am confident that a city with such faith in the people closest to kids is more likely to develop solutions to the challenges of poverty than is a top-down, big city system of micro-management and ZIP code confinement. What differentiates New Orleans schools from those in other large cities is that their future – their successes and their struggles both – is fully in the hands of the people who choose schools and who lead schools, the parents and educators who know and love each child.

In that spirit, we can tell a New Orleans story that is both rightly proud of who we are and deeply humble as to whom we have yet to become.

With great gratitude and admiration,

John White

State Superintendent of Education

Louisiana Believes