

OPINION | COMMENTARY

A Fresh Turn in the New Orleans Charter School Miracle

Oversight will revert to the city from the state, but with safeguards to ensure that gains remain intact.



On the streets of New Orleans. *PHOTO: ISTOCK*

By **JOHN WHITE**

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The state of Louisiana has begun a new phase in the transformation of New Orleans schools. Senate Bill 432, signed into law May 12, transfers oversight of 52 charter schools, serving nearly 30,000 students, from the state to local authorities. In doing so it creates a novel role for the New Orleans school board and the district's central office—a governance model that offers hope to other cities that seek enduring improvements in public education.

American education reformers have made great strides in improving academic standards and creating new schooling options for low-income parents. Yet urban school

districts' central offices, often overly bureaucratic and occasionally corrupt, have proven resistant to lasting reform.

Consider the abuse of power displayed by the Orleans Parish School Board before Hurricane Katrina. The board's former president pleaded guilty to charges of accepting \$140,000 in bribes from an algebra software vendor. Principals recall midyear dictates, without explanation, to overhaul curriculum and staffing. It was an incoherent mess of a school system that served well enough those students qualifying for academically selective schools but could not address the needs of its largely impoverished student body

In the wake of Katrina, Louisiana placed the bulk of the city's schools under state oversight, gradually converting them into nonprofit charter schools. The Orleans Parish School Board concurrently converted into charters 18 of the 24 schools over which it maintained authority. This model has allowed nearly all of the city's schools to make independent decisions about curriculum, personnel and budgeting. Competition has allowed successful school operators to grow, while accountability has required that organizations failing to meet the mark be replaced.

Undeniable progress has been made: Although New Orleans public schools serve one-third fewer students than they did before Katrina, they send twice as many to college. But further progress, in a city rife with poverty and social stratification, has also required transforming the district's central office from a disorganized instrument of political interests to a focused regulator protecting the rights of disadvantaged children.

When Louisiana spends a dollar on a charter school, two cents are set aside for the district bureaucracy. Forced to slim down, state and local officials have had to concentrate on their essential responsibility of overseeing the nonprofit organizations that operate charter schools.

Each school signs a contract with its regulator—either the state or the local board—that includes performance objectives and requirements for responsible operation. Nonprofit groups that miss academic targets or prove unable to capably serve students with disabilities, for example, have lost their license to operate and been replaced.

This approach has evolved beyond assuring compliance toward aggressively protecting individual students' civil rights. In 2011, school leaders and regulators created a citywide enrollment process whereby all families complete one application for admission to New Orleans's charter schools. Parents can apply to any school in any neighborhood, and

schools must accept all assigned students.

The state and the local board created a similar system to manage expulsions fairly. Both regulators adopted a funding formula that distributes dollars to schools proportionate to the needs of impoverished, disabled or struggling students.

Now, under Senate Bill 432, all New Orleans schools will be unified under the oversight of the local board, which will be required to preserve hard-fought changes. New Orleans schools will continue to be operated by nonprofits and will maintain the independence to make decisions on behalf of the children they serve. The bill protects the rights of parents to seek admission to any school in any neighborhood. And it requires that the district superintendent serve as a strong regulator, and one whose decisions on school-quality issues can be vetoed only by a supermajority of the board.

Much more must be done in New Orleans. Performance in some schools has stagnated. Options for early childhood education are limited. Health services and alternative education remain patchy.

These are common problems for cities. What's different in New Orleans is that solutions will come not from central-office mandates but from nonprofit entrepreneurs. Lean regulators will focus intently on the schools' performance and students' rights. This reconceiving of power in education, now codified in Louisiana law, offers hope to the nation that the urban school district's central office, long an immovable instrument of politics, can be reimagined for the sake of those children who most need a good education.

Mr. White is the Louisiana state superintendent of education.