

# New Orleans Recovery School District set to convert entirely to charter schools

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Last week, the New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) announced it would shut down the five remaining traditional public schools that remained in its charge, transforming its jurisdiction into the first major city all charter school district in the US. This is a new stage in the drive by the ruling elite to destroy public education, and do away with the principle that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, has the right to high quality, free schooling.

As of next fall, the district's traditional public schools—Benjamin Banneker and A.P. Tureaud elementaries, Walter L. Cohen, Sarah T. Reed, and George Washington Carver high schools—will be either shuttered or transformed into charter schools. The RSD has been operating within the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the city in 2005. The district oversees 33,000 students.

In the wake of Katrina, the state seized control of over three-fourths of the city's schools, handing the majority of the facilities over to the RSD and leaving the remaining traditional schools in the hands of the Orleans Parish School Board (PSB). Rather than seeking to rebuild the battered school system, authorities exploited the catastrophe to target the city for a complete restructuring along free market lines, firing thousands of teachers and transforming the majority of schools into privately operated charters. As of today, 90 percent of all students in the city of New Orleans are enrolled in charters—the highest total in the US.

“We’ve had a clear plan in place,” stated Patrick Dobard, superintendent of the RSD to the *Washington Post*. “We’re going to create a new legacy, a new memory. We don’t have to hold onto some of the things in the past that didn’t work.” This is self-serving and reactionary nonsense. State and local governments

starved the New Orleans public schools for decades, allowing them to deteriorate as conditions of poverty and social misery grew. The state of the public school system was the result of deliberate social policies. This then opens the door for profiteers and free-market zealots to prey on the schools in the name of “rescuing” the children from “failing” schools.

In 2010, the city was awarded \$1.8 billion to renovate its schools as a part of the disaster assistance given by FEMA. One of the key stipulations of this funding permitted the city to construct new facilities which could then be handed over to private operators, rather than rebuild the remaining traditional schools. The *Post* story notes that many of these rebuilt schools have simply been given to charter operators free of charge.

The move to shutter the remaining traditional schools is unpopular with the city's population; a recent poll conducted by the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University showed that only 41 percent of New Orleans residents supported the move. Sean Johnson, dean of students at Benjamin Banneker high school told the *Post*, “The charters have money and want to make more money. They have their own boards, make their own rules, accept who they want and put out who they want to put out.”

The plan to shut down traditional schools in New Orleans will be used as a model to be replicated in cities across the country. “Twenty years ago, the first state charter laws showed that districts need not run every public school ...The RSD is now demonstrating that urban districts may not need to run any schools,” said Andy Smarick, senior policy fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, of the decision to hand schools to individual private operators.

After New Orleans, Detroit and Washington, DC are

the most heavily charterized regions in the country, with 51 and 44 percent respectively of their student populations attending the schools.

The attempt to convert traditional public school facilities into charters is a bipartisan effort. In 2010, the Obama administration applauded the firing of the entire staff of Central Falls High School in Rhode Island for opposing demanded “reform” measures, which would have torn up their contract and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay. Under its “Race to the Top” program, the Obama administration’s signature education “reform,” basic funding and school supplies are tied to the implementation of onerous standardized testing procedures and merit pay, with schools failing to do so running the risk of being shut down or taken over by a private charter.



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