

New Orleans local school board makes its pitch to charter operators

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In what is becoming an annual spectacle in New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) is pitching itself to charter operators in the state-run Recovery School District, which took over most of the city's schools after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Recovery School District (RSD) oversees schools throughout the state, although the vast majority of its schools are in New Orleans. It was formed by the Louisiana state legislature in 2003 to take over public schools deemed to be "failing" in order to convert them into privately run charter schools. The state later seized on the opportunity created by Hurricane Katrina, which flooded over 80 percent of New Orleans and devastated the city's public school infrastructure, to transfer almost every school in the city to RSD, leaving OPSB a rump district with only a handful of schools. This May, RSD closed its last remaining traditional public school, becoming the first all-charter school district in the United States.

Originally, RSD was supposed to return schools to their local districts once they were no longer "failing." However, in 2010 this policy was changed to allow these schools the choice of whether to return to their local district or stay in RSD. The result is that OPSB is forced to compete with RSD to provide the most favorable conditions for charter schools operating within its own boundaries.

To date, however, no charter school has ever elected to rejoin OPSB in the four years that they have been able to choose. The Recovery School District, originally justified as an extraordinary measure, is increasingly becoming a permanent fixture in New Orleans schools.

This year a record-high 36 schools, well over half of RSD's 57 charters, are eligible to switch back to OPSB, more than double the 17 schools last year.

Fifteen of those 36 have already decided to stay put, while the rest have until January 5 to decide.

Local investigative news outlet *The Lens* noted the apparent frustration of many charter operators with the weak offers by OPSB, summing up their attitude as "polish your sales pitch, and explain what's in it for us." One charter board "chided a [school] board representative [at a recent meeting], saying he should have made a harder sell." "Don't just hit us in November, December," charter head J.P. Hymel told the representative, a low-ranking district administrator, "But come to us throughout the year."

One of the major drawbacks of OPSB's "sales pitch" in the eyes of charter operators is the "uncertainty" of an elected local school board. "Educating students is a tough business, and one of the things we always try to do is reduce the amount of uncertainty," Hymel told *The Lens* in 2013, "[There is] an amount of uncertainty associated with OPSB, certainly subject to various elections." In 2010, Tulane University's Cowen Institute, a New Orleans-based pro-charter think tank, proposed that this be mitigated by replacing some or all of OPSB's board members with unelected appointees.

The prospect of returning to OPSB is so unpopular among RSD charters that the only serious move toward transferring happened almost by mistake. The board of directors of New Beginnings, which runs four charters in the city, nearly voted 3-2 last month to transfer its high school to OPSB in a sparsely attended meeting that only just achieved a quorum after one board member arrived an hour late. The chairwoman, urged on by panicked colleagues, then averted "disaster" by casting a vote to force a tie, violating parliamentary procedure.

Although it has not been able to attract support from

RSD charter schools, the OPSB has been a party to the attack on public education from the beginning. The school district summarily fired 7,500 teachers and staff in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, virtually wiping out the local teachers' union and paving the way for the hiring of lower-paid and less qualified replacements.

The school board fully supports the charter school movement. Fully 14 of the district's remaining 20 schools, encompassing 84 percent of all of its students, are charters schools, with three more slated to open in the fall of 2015. This already makes it the second-most charterized school district in America (behind RSD at 100 percent), nearly thirty points above Detroit Public Schools, the most charterized school district outside of Louisiana.

The district also has a relatively close working relationship with RSD. The two districts jointly administer a common application system, known as OneApp, for students attending the city's charters schools. OPSB also effectively acts as RSD's local tax collector, passing on \$138 million to New Orleans-area RSD charters in the latest budget.

Since the 2012 elections, OPSB has been effectively split between a faction supporting the district's current relationship with RSD and a faction supporting more aggressive attempts to recover their lost schools. The division is so bitter that OPSB has not had a permanent superintendent in over two years, as the seven-member school board has not been able to find the necessary five-vote supermajority to hire a new one. Public meetings of the board frequently degenerate into ad hominem attacks, much to the delight of supporters of RSD.

Freshman board member Leslie Ellison has been particularly vocal in her opposition to RSD, declaring in the local media that she wants RSD's footprint in New Orleans to shrink "to zero." She opposes a current proposal for a property millage to fund RSD's renovation of its facilities, declaring her opposition to funding "an entity that has no accountability to the public at all." She also supports calls for the return of John McDonogh High School, which closed last year after losing its charter operator, to OPSB.

Underneath her demagoguery however, Ellison is a right-wing supporter of charter schools. She even opposed a law barring charter schools from discrimination against homosexuals in 2012. Her only

concern, and the only concern of her faction as a whole, is the return of RSD's charter schools to OPSB.



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