

Two New Orleans charter schools vote to return to local oversight

Tom Hall
8 January 2015

Dr. King Charter School and Lagniappe Academies became the first charter schools in the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) to return to the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). The schools cited expectations of more favorable contract terms than they currently enjoy in the state-run RSD. Far from being a return to “local control,” their decision means the further consolidation of charter schools’ domination over New Orleans education, as the two competing school districts vie for their favor.

RSD, a statewide “turnaround” district created by the state legislature in 2003, took over 80 percent of all public schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005. Though RSD oversees schools throughout the state, the vast majority of its schools are in New Orleans.

RSD has been the spearhead for the drive to charterize New Orleans public schools after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which was seized upon to turn New Orleans into a testing ground for privatization and austerity. Last summer, it became the country’s first all-charter school district, with 57 charter schools in New Orleans alone. OPSB is now the second most charterized school district in the country after RSD, with 14 charters out of its 20 current schools.

However, this is just the tip of the charter school iceberg. By 2014, there were approximately 6,400 schools throughout the country, enrolling 2.5 million students, a roughly 50 percent increase since 2006-2007. Charter schools have been expanded nationally, typically under the guise of “reforming” underperforming public schools. The city of Detroit, similarly devastated, albeit by the man-made disaster of deindustrialization, ranks second to New Orleans in the “market share” of charter schools, with 55 percent of

its students attending charters in the 2013-2014 school year.

Before 2010, RSD schools automatically returned to local jurisdiction once they were no longer deemed failing, reflecting the district’s official justification of RSD as a “turnaround” district. This rule was changed in 2010 to allow non-failing charter schools to choose whether to return to local jurisdiction. The result is that the OPSB is forced to compete with RSD to provide the most favorable environment for charter schools, ensuring that charter “reforms” will remain entrenched if and when RSD finally leaves New Orleans.

Until now, no school has made the switch, primarily due to the uncertainty of an elected school board. OPSB board meetings have frequently degenerated into shouting matches. For the last two years, the board has failed come to an agreement on a new superintendent. The intense political infighting within OPSB is frequently cited by charter groups as only increasing that uncertainty.

However, there are signs that this is beginning to subside, as the faction within OPSB in favor of a more confrontational approach to RSD seems to be gaining the upper hand. In their December meeting, the school board voted 6-0 with one abstention to file a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana in order to block RSD from reopening closed schools with new charter operators, arguing that it lies outside of the scope of RSD’s mandate.

At the same meeting, the board voted to approve two finalists in its search for a new superintendent, indicating that the nearly unprecedented gridlock is beginning to come to an end. It remains to be seen, however, whether the board will be able to muster the five-vote supermajority needed to enter contract negotiations with a finally elected candidate.

Despite posturing by board members, OPSB is unanimous in its support of charter schools. Leslie Ellison, who has emerged as the most outspoken critic of RSD on the board, is a right-wing pro-charter figure, who even opposed a 2012 law prohibiting charters from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation. The board's only concern is defending their own position within the consolidating charter school landscape in New Orleans.

For their part, the two charters switching to OPSB, Martin Luther King Charter School and Lagniappe Academies, are motivated as much by their increasingly untenable positions within RSD as by better financial prospects under OPSB.

In early December, Martin Luther King Charter School, the only remaining school in the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, reversed its previous decision to stay in RSD, a week after having its contract with RSD docked by two years for illegal and discriminatory admissions practices. That five-year renewal, instead of the seven that administrators were expecting, was also contingent on signing a rider reaffirming adherence to admissions regulations. The school's charter management organization, Friends of King Schools, maintain that the penalty is retaliation for an earlier federal civil rights complaint against RSD, alleging that the group has received unfair treatment because it is run by African Americans.

Far from being unfairly maligned, The Friends of King board has been in the news repeatedly in recent years for ethics violations. They have repeatedly violated the state's open meetings law, most notably with a \$70,000 staff retreat to a casino. In October, Friends of King CEO Doris Hicks, a celebrated figure in the charter school movement and a member of the federal Department of Education's National Assessment Governing Board, was charged with violating state nepotism laws by hiring three immediate family members to work at Martin Luther King (three other family members were hired legally through exemptions in the law).

Friends of King hopes to get a significantly more favorable contract from the local school district. "Orleans Parish is saying to me we may be able to get a contract for 7 or 10 years," chairwoman Hilda Young told the media. "We definitely would get a 7-year contract because we qualify for it under state

guidelines."

Lagniappe Academies became the second school to make the switch last Friday, three days before the January 5 deadline. Their board of directors likewise reversed a November decision to stay after revisiting their financial situation. The small 180-student "community school" hopes that OPSB will help provide for services that they currently contract out for themselves. School officials specifically singled out nursing and buses as potential areas of cost savings.

The school also hopes that OPSB will help them find a permanent facility, something that RSD has been unable to provide. Currently, the entire school is housed in six connected portable facilities sitting in the parking lot of a closed-down grocery store.

The board of Lagniappe Academies is headed by Ray Smart, president of the Smart Family Foundation. The nonprofit, founded by former *Esquire* magazine publisher David Smart, is at the forefront of pro-charter "venture philanthropy." Ray Smart has been directly involved in charter schools throughout the country as an administrator, primarily in New York and Connecticut, and serves on the board of the Center for Education Reform, a national pro-charter group.

Such are the social layers that OPSB is courting. The integration of these schools into the permanent local school district, which was officially the state's plan from the beginning, can only mean that the program of austerity and social counterrevolution embarked upon by the ruling class after Hurricane Katrina is being made permanent.



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