

The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Collection

New Orleans Public Schools: An Unrealized Democratic Ideal

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Introduction

New Orleans is home to one of the first public school systems in the South. Indeed, New Orleans was a southern pioneer in public education—influenced by the northern democratic ideals of Horace Mann.¹ These ideals were that a public school system should be tax-supported, open to all children, and would support the ability of all individuals to participate in society and the economy.² But, the values of democratic preparation and the common school experience that were foundational to Mann’s original rationale for public schools have never been fully manifested in the New Orleans public school system. The story of public education in New Orleans was rarely about educating the public at large; instead, it was about educating certain segments of the population. For much of its history, the New Orleans school system has been characterized by racial and socioeconomic inequity.³ Moreover, public education in New Orleans has sometimes been a barrier to social equality rather than a bridge. Thus, some stakeholders have rightfully sought ways to disrupt the shortcomings of this system throughout its history. Most recently, the city embarked on a nationally-prominent reform path. There is value in seeing New Orleans public schools as they emerged, developed, and changed over nearly two centuries and to remind ourselves that public education in our city existed, and mattered, long before 2005.

History of Public Education in New Orleans

EARLY ORIGINS OF RACIALLY SEGREGATED SCHOOLS (1841–1862)

New Orleans public schools were formally established in 1841 when the Louisiana Legislature approved a portion of state education funds to support public education in the city of New Orleans, pending locally-raised matching funds.⁴ Originally, the public school system utilized repurposed buildings. The very first new public schools were built in 1858, bearing the name of former slaveholder John McDonogh (1779-1850), a real estate tycoon of his time, who made his wealth from the railroad between New Orleans and Baltimore.⁵ As part of his estate, McDonogh donated money to the public school system to erect 30 schools bearing his name for the children of New Orleans. These schools initially included white students and free children of color, but did not include enslaved children. Four of the buildings were constructed prior to the Civil War, one in each of the subdivided school districts across the city. These included District 1, which was the primarily American (and English-speaking) areas upriver from Canal Street; District 2, the old colonial (and primarily French-speaking) city between Canal Street and Esplanade Avenue; District 3 downriver from Esplanade; and District 4, the uptown suburb of Lafayette, the present-day Carrollton/Riverbend neighborhood. These subdivided school districts (in contrast to having a unified city school district) allowed for localized decisionmaking regarding language of instruction, co-education policies, amount of religious instruction, and racial makeup of public schools.

PUBLIC EDUCATION DURING OCCUPATION AND RECONSTRUCTION (1862–1877)

One of the more radical phases of public education history occurred under Union military rule between 1862 and 1876, as described by historians Donald DeVore and Joseph Logsdon in their meticulous volume on the history of New Orleans public schools.⁶ Two years following the occupation of New Orleans, in April 1862, Union troops, along with various civilian and military organizations, established Freedmen’s schools to educate recently freed slaves in Louisiana. With the war still raging, the military opened up seven all-black public schools in New Orleans by 1864.



THE DATA CENTER

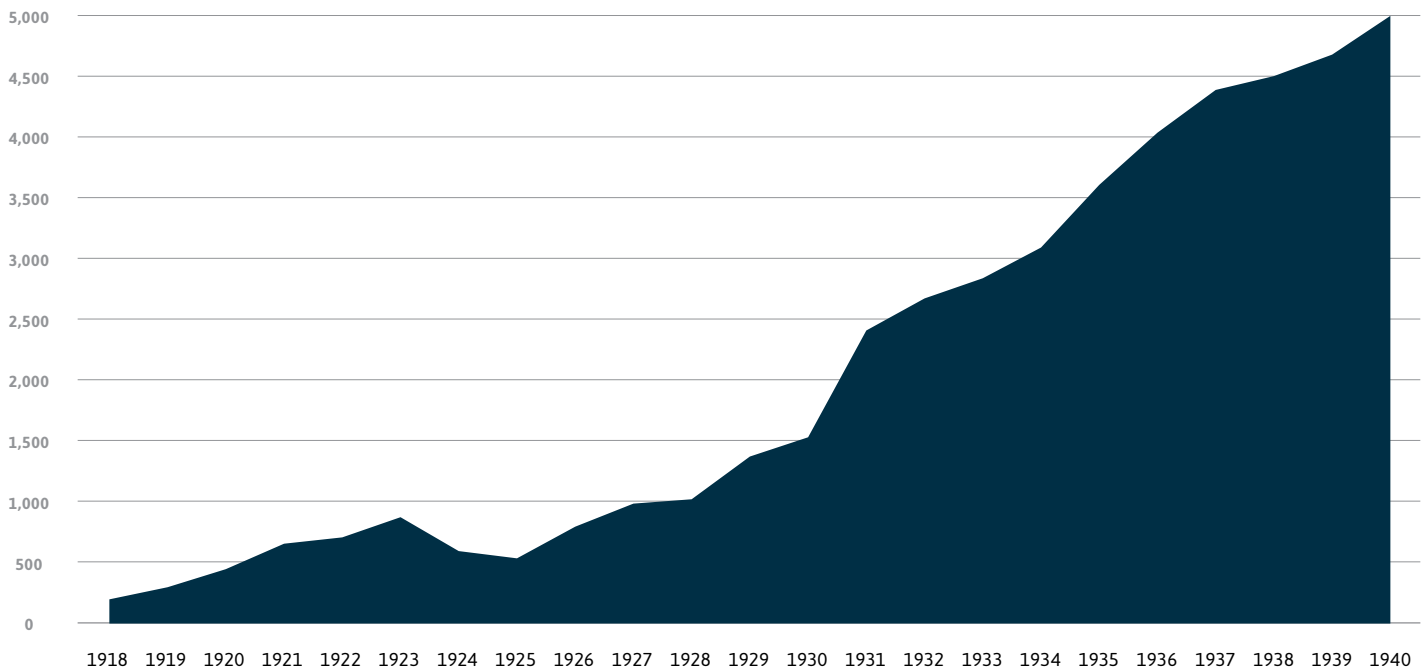
The 1867 Louisiana Constitution required racially integrated public institutions, and although the application of this law to public schools was challenged in the courts, schools began integrating in 1870. In 1875, approximately 11 percent of the teachers were black, and during the last 6 years of Reconstruction (1871–1876), about one-third of all public school students attended integrated schools.⁷ But, white resistance to integrated schools came to a head in 1874. Three days of rioting in New Orleans led to early closure of the schools before the Christmas break.⁸ Then in 1876, the U.S. presidential election resulted in state government being returned to the control of the planter class (Southern aristocracy). Both integration and much of the progress in universal public education was stalled. The dichotomy of the Freedmen’s schools (serving recently freed slaves) and the McDonogh schools (serving whites and formerly free people of color) set the foundation for racially separate public schools in New Orleans.

As a condition of philanthropist John McDonogh’s bequest, beginning in 1875, students attending schools bearing his name honored his wish of observing a Founder’s Day ceremony, locally known as “McDonogh Day.” Students were required to gather at his tomb, sing praises unto his name, and lay a wreath in his memory. These ceremonies persisted for decades as separate events for students attending all white and all black McDonogh schools, a fact that would serve as a flashpoint nearly 100 years later.⁹

JIM CROW AND THE RESURGENCE OF SEGREGATION (1877–1954)

The doctrine of racial separation was legally supported within most southern states during the era of Jim Crow. New Orleans was no exception. In 1892, Homer Plessy, a mulatto New Orleans native, boarded a whites-only train car to test the constitutionality of the racial separation of facilities.¹⁰ Plessy’s legal contest culminated with the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1896 decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine and supported existing segregation laws, including those pertaining to public schools. Before this ruling, black Americans’ political rights were increasingly expanded by three civil war era constitutional amendments (in 1865, 1868 & 1870) and numerous laws passed by Congress. In 1883, the Supreme Court struck down these laws ruling that the 14th Amendment did not give Congress authority to prevent discrimination by private individuals. Victims of racial discrimination were told to seek relief not from the federal government, but from the states. Unfortunately, state governments were passing legislation that codified inequality between the races. Laws requiring the establishment of separate schools for children of each race were most common; however, segregation was soon extended to encompass most public and semi-public facilities.¹¹

Disinvestment in public schooling occurred almost immediately after the end of federal occupation in New Orleans, with the state legislature reducing school tax rates by 80 percent in 1877.¹² In 1900, the local school board moved to restrict black enrollment in public schools to the first five grades, despite blacks having attended public high schools for nearly a generation.¹³ When a policy of providing free textbooks to poor students was ended, school superintendent William O. Rogers begrudgingly permitted the teachers in the city’s black schools to abandon the official curriculum, an act which DeVore and Logsdon noted, “[ended] all appearance of equal education for black students.”¹⁴ In these ways, the issue of providing tax-supported public education for African American students was settled. African American students would be included as part of the tax-supported system of public schools, but due to racial segregation policies and chronic under-funding, they would be provided with separate and inferior public education. The post-1877 state legislature slashed funding for public education, which impacted textbook purchases, curriculum access, and a host of other necessities for quality education. Nonetheless, the black community made some strides within this officially segregated and unequal system. Between 1918 and 1940, black high school enrollments increased 30-fold, supported by the opening of McDonogh #35 in 1917 and Booker T. Washington trade school in 1942.¹⁵

Figure 1. BLACK HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS 1918–1940

Source: DeVore & Logsdon (1991), p. 194.

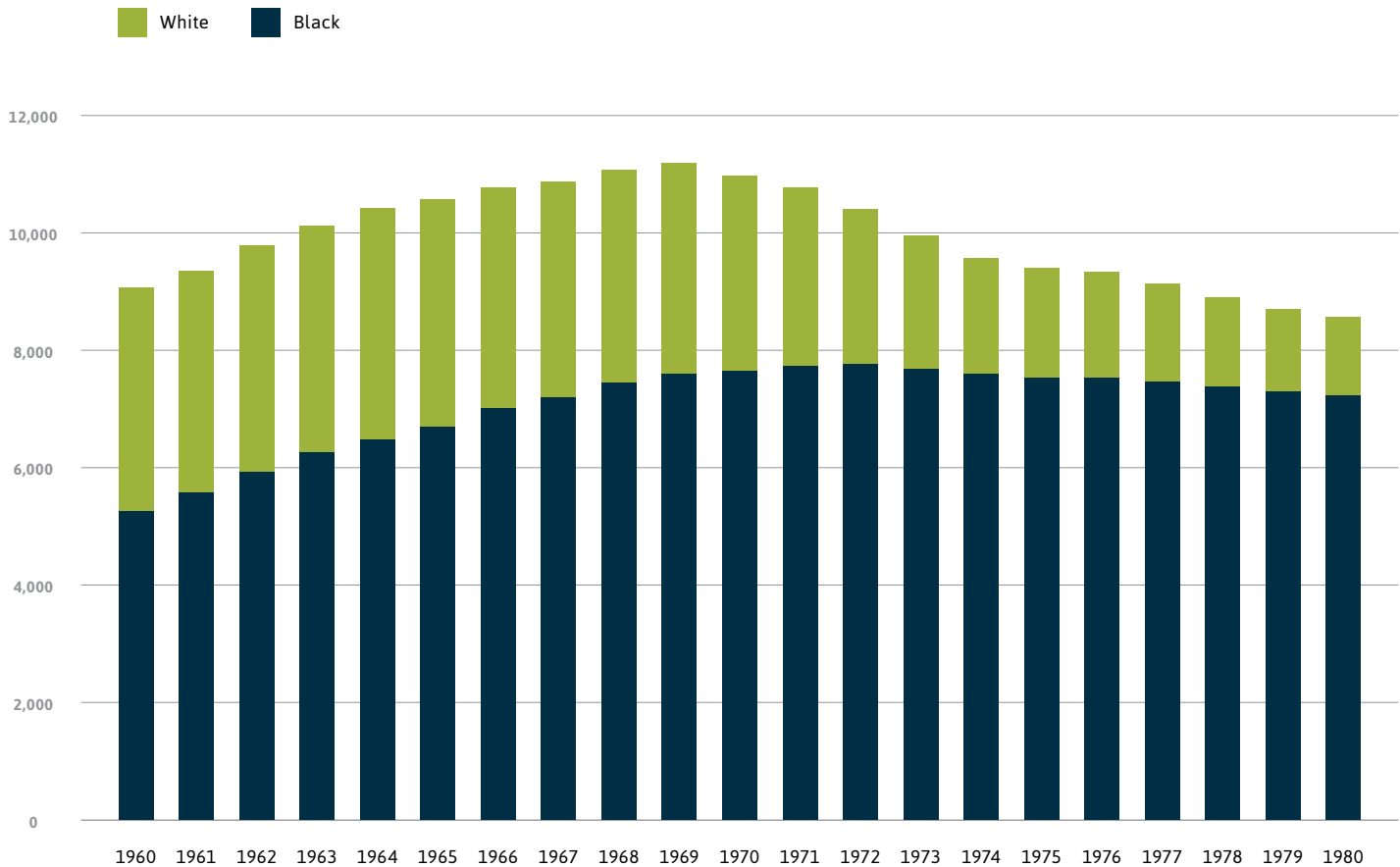
CIVIL RIGHTS ERA, DESEGREGATION, AND RESEGREGATION (1954-2005)

After nearly three generations of strong segregationist policies in New Orleans, mounting resistance (through both legal action and public protest) ushered in the Civil Rights era, with a chief concern being the desegregation of the New Orleans public schools. This fight began formally in 1952 when *Bush v. Orleans Parish Schools* was filed in U.S. District Court by A.P. Tureaud to force desegregation of the schools in Orleans Parish. While not decided until after the 1954 *Brown* decision prohibited racial segregation of public schools, Tureaud's filing set off a multi-year odyssey involving multiple court filings and numerous attempts by the governor, state legislature, and many white citizens to block court-ordered integration decisions.¹⁶ In 1954, civil rights activists staged one of the first protests of the educational system during this era as they launched the first McDonogh Day Boycott. These leaders and much of the black community were weary of the hypocrisy of this forced practice and deemed it degrading to students of color to praise a former slaveholder.¹⁷

The 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* (and *Brown II* in 1955) decision by the U.S. Supreme Court (of which New Orleans was not a part) directed school boards involved in the case to desegregate "with all deliberate speed." However, it wasn't until *Bush v. Orleans* was decided in February of 1956 that a U.S. District Court of Appeals held that New Orleans public schools were still unconstitutionally segregated and ordered the school board to end school segregation—marking the first of such rulings in the Deep South. After many attempts by the segregationist legislatures at the state and municipal levels of government to undermine this decision by the courts, it wasn't until 1960 that schools in New Orleans began desegregating.¹⁸

Under the supervision of federal judge J. Skelly Wright (also a former teacher at New Orleans' Fortier High School), three six-year-old girls (Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost, and Gail Etienne) integrated one formerly white elementary school, McDonogh No. 19. And, another six-year-old girl named Ruby Bridges integrated another formerly white school, William Frantz, on the same day, November 14, 1960.¹⁹ The ugly white-led riots in response to these events made national news and initiated a mass exodus of white families in the 1960s and 1970s to private schools and suburban public schools.²⁰ In 1960, white students comprised 42 percent of the public school enrollment. By 1970, this number shrank to 30 percent and only 15 percent by the 1980s. The demographics of the district have fluctuated only slightly over the intervening 38 years.²¹ But, re-segregation was not simply a matter of white flight. Middle-income African American families also departed the public schools, albeit somewhat later and over a longer period of time.²²

Figure 2. NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS 1960–1980



Source: Devore & Logsdon (1991), p. 265

After court-mandated desegregation, it took only one generation for the district to transform from one that served a large swath of the city's children (albeit in largely segregated settings) to one that almost exclusively served its low-income African American students. Schools faced declining public support and came to be seen more as charitable causes rather than shared public institutions.²³ This segregation, however, also provided leadership and professional opportunities for African Americans who had been shut out of most public posts since Reconstruction. After whites abandoned the public school system, schools became black institutions supporting black self-determination with black resources, energy, and ingenuity. The determination of the African American community to create L.B. Landry High School in the Algiers neighborhood on the west bank of the Mississippi River is one example. The school opened in 1938 as the only high school for black students on the west bank of the city.²⁴ Like L.B. Landry, many African American schools served as vital community hubs, despite the loss of political and taxpayer support that accompanied white and middle-class flight.²⁵

Black political power eventually influenced the district. For example, in the late 1980s and 1990s, a movement was afoot to begin removing former slaveholders' names from schools now largely occupied by African American students.²⁶ But, the reduction of taxpayer support was not inconsequential. Student achievement data (more widely available by the late 1990s) indicated public school students struggled academically. By spring 2005, 34 percent of New Orleans high schoolers scored unsatisfactory (the lowest of five scoring categories) on the English portion of the Graduation Exit Exam compared with 15 percent for the state of Louisiana as a whole.²⁷ On the math portion, 47 percent scored unsatisfactory compared with 24 percent for the state of Louisiana. Similarly, the same state report showed that 28 percent of New Orleans 4th graders scored unsatisfactory on the English section of the LEAP exam compared to 13 percent of students statewide. In math, 35 percent of New Orleans 4th graders scored unsatisfactory compared to 17 percent of students statewide.

POST-KATRINA EDUCATION REFORM (2005–PRESENT)

The 2005 state takeover of the majority of New Orleans public schools and the ensuing conversion of the district into the country's most charter-saturated school system has garnered significant national attention.²⁸ The swift passage of Act 35 by the Louisiana Legislature in November 2005 shifted control from a locally-elected, predominantly African American school board to a statewide, mostly white Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The state's Recovery School District (RSD) gained control of 112 schools in New Orleans and was given the power to directly operate these schools or outsource them to charter management organizations.²⁹ At the center of this recent reform effort is the chartering mechanism itself, by which (in Louisiana) nonprofit operators are contracted to operate a certain number of public schools with contract renewal being contingent on satisfactory academic and financial performance. Operating much or all of a public school district in this manner has become known as portfolio-based reform such that schools are treated like stocks in a managed investment portfolio. Schools performing well receive additional investments (more schools, new facilities) while schools not performing well are either closed or re-contracted to other operators.³⁰

This reform effort also led to ending the contract with the United Teachers of New Orleans, firing over 7,000 employees of the Orleans Parish School Board, exemptions from teacher certification requirements, and rapid expansion (and more recent retreat) of the state's Recovery School District into the daily operation of public schools in the city.³¹ The post-Katrina era has also led to a hardening of political positions about public education in New Orleans, largely dominated by the ascendant school reform coalitions versus newly marginalized traditional education and civil rights communities.³²

While ideological battles about the role of public governance in K-12 education raged, significant (and often under-reported) advocacy led by young people in New Orleans re-emerged. After being displaced to other cities where schools provided a better overall quality of learning, the sharp comparison unveiled the inadequacies of New Orleans public schools. Moreover, youth who experienced the disaster suffered significant and lasting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³³ The shock of the disaster and evacuation was compounded by the shock of returning to a totally changed environment post-Katrina.³⁴ New Orleans youth struggling with PTSD often described their most salient concern as, "How can I rebuild my community?"³⁵

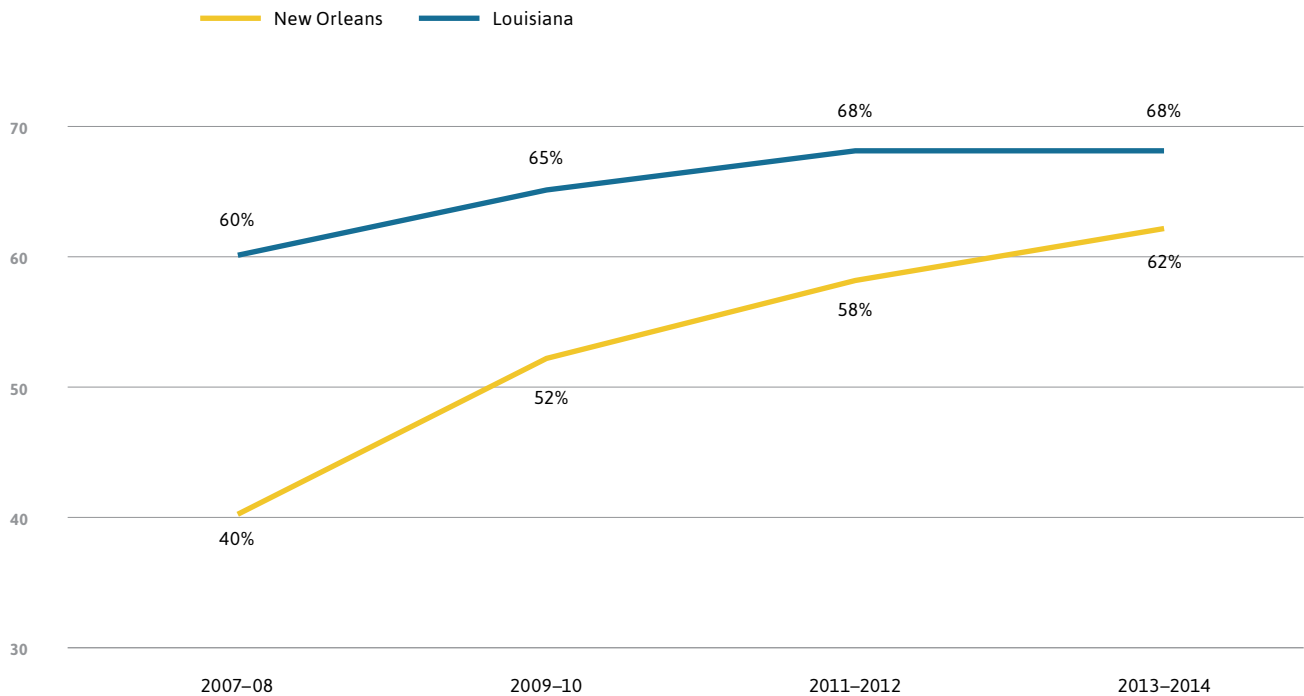
Organizations that formed post-Katrina, such as the Gulfsouth Youth Action Fund, Fire Youth Squad, Kids Rethink, and VAYLA, emerged to mobilize youth and provide a platform for their voices to be heard regarding matters of concern to them. These organizations conducted research and engaged young people in the rebuilding of their own schools, helping them cope positively with the disaster.³⁶ Activism builds self-confidence and self-efficacy and allows youth to impact their environment while providing them with a transformative personal experience.³⁷ Youth were vocal about wanting better quality food choices for school lunch, access to school-based mental health services, and safer schools.³⁸ Collapsed key infrastructure for recreational outlets and the slow return of schools were also concerns articulated by youth.³⁹ In addition, youth led a broad civic advocacy effort to eliminate the placement of a toxic garbage dump near one neighborhood. As a result of the insurgence of "youth voice," city planners, school officials, and neighborhoods became more vigilant about youth inclusion in key decisions and planning processes.⁴⁰

For youth without such constructive outlets, the risk of becoming "disconnected" (neither in school nor working) escalated post-Katrina. Families moved, on average, 3.5 times in the six months after the storm, and many evacuated children missed school.⁴¹ As displaced youth returned to New Orleans, concerns about "disconnected youth" (young people age 16-24 who are out of school and out of work) became more prevalent. Many stakeholders preferred the term "opportunity youth" because of the potential value these youth could add to their communities. According to data spanning 2011 to 2015, roughly 16 percent of all New Orleanians age 16-24 years old were neither in school nor working. Fully 87 percent of these "opportunity youth" were African American and 82 percent of them were 20 years or older. This population of youth has appropriately become a focus of the nonprofit community and youth organizing work.⁴²

Current Inequities

On the whole, academic performance in New Orleans public schools has improved steadily since 2005. As published in *The New Orleans Index at Ten Collection*, the percentage of New Orleans students scoring at the “proficient” level on the state’s academic assessments has steadily increased and approached the Louisiana average.⁴³

Figure 3. PERCENT PROFICIENT ON STATE TESTS; ALL STUDENTS, ALL GRADES, ALL TESTS

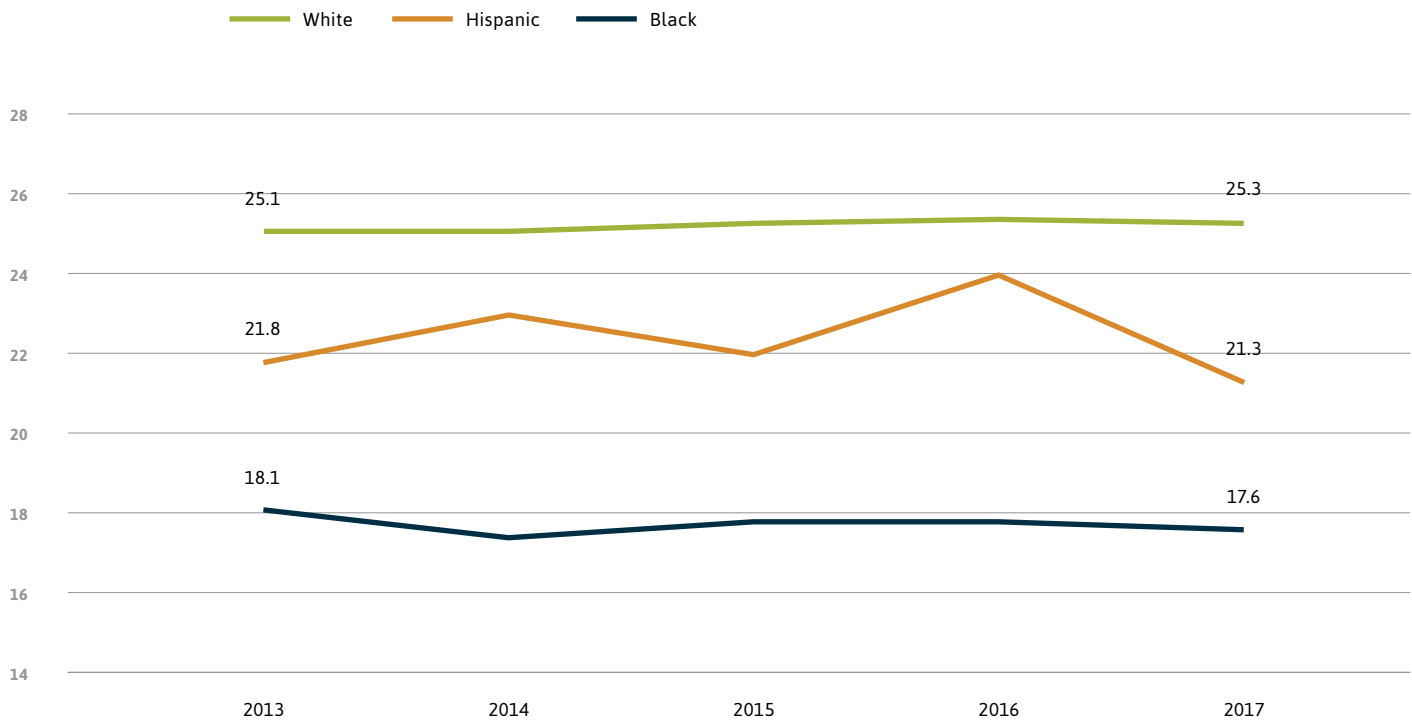


Source: Perry, A., Harris, D., Buerger, C., & Mack, V. (2015) *The New Orleans Index at Ten, The Transformation of New Orleans Public Schools, analysis of Leap, iLeap, GEE, EOC, and ACT scores from Louisiana Department of Education Academic Outcomes*

In the last decade marked by broad and relatively rapid improvement on K-12 academic outcomes, inequity is still seen in a number of outcomes connected to K-12 schools in New Orleans.⁴⁴ During the 2014-15 school year, while 60 percent of public school students in grades 3-8 met proficiency targets on state-mandated tests, disaggregated data shows that 77 percent of white public school students met this target, but only 58 percent of students of color did so.⁴⁵ Similarly, while there have been positive gains in New Orleans’ high school completion rate over the last 30 years, black and Hispanic 16-24 year-olds are still three to four times more likely than their white peers to not have a high school diploma nor be working towards one.⁴⁶

One-quarter of New Orleans students are enrolled in private schools; as such, private schools are an important part of the K-12 “system” in New Orleans.⁴⁷ ACT scores for students in both public and private high schools reveal a large racial disparity in the New Orleans school system’s overall ability to academically prepare students for college.⁴⁸

Figure 4. AVERAGE COMPOSITE ACT SCORE FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN ORLEANS PARISH BY RACE/ETHNICITY; 2013-2017 GRADUATING CLASSES



Source: Plyer, A. & Gardere, L. (2018). *The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Edition*. New Orleans, LA: The Data Center.

The 17.6 average composite score for black students should be particularly concerning for policymakers because students do not become eligible for the state's TOPS college-tuition awards at four-year campuses without a score of 20 on the ACT, and most state universities have required a score of 20 on the ACT for admission. This means that the majority of black students from New Orleans high schools are not eligible to attend a four-year college or university in Louisiana.⁴⁹

The legacy of educational inequality is made clear in 2016 data showing that more than 85 percent of white adults (25 years and older) in New Orleans have attended college, but only 55 percent of black females and 42 percent of black males have done so.⁵⁰ If long-term outcomes like this are to be improved, K-12 education must sharpen its focus on inequality.

In addition to student academic outcomes, many structural components of the post-Katrina education system exhibit inequalities as well. The New Orleans Education Equity Index, published by a collaboration of multiple community organizations, found a number of troubling inequities in a system that is generally improving academically:⁵¹

- * The few white students in New Orleans public schools are concentrated in schools with selective admissions requirements, with low percentages of low-income families, and where more teachers have graduate degrees.
- * Teachers of color are vastly under-represented relative to the student body (58 percent of teachers and 91 percent of students are non-white).
- * There is an uneven distribution of experienced teachers. The report identified six schools where more than half of teachers had at least 15 years of experience, but another group of 32 schools where the majority had less than four years of experience.
- * Because the school choice system requires students to travel often to distant school campuses, schools are spending between \$172 and \$2,405 annually per student on bussing and transportation. The highest transportation expenses are often borne by schools serving the neediest students whose families are more likely to lack private transportation.
- * Accessibility is a concern as 31 percent of school facilities are not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In terms of political representation, evidence suggests that charter school boards do not represent the demographics of the public school population or even the voting-age population in New Orleans. An analysis of 25 charter school boards found that the black makeup of charter school boards was statistically lower than the black makeup of the voting-age population. Dr. Steven Nelson of the University of Memphis suggests that board composition influences the types of policies created, and lower black representation puts black students at risk for policies that do not serve them well.⁵²

Lastly, inequitable school discipline practices have been identified in New Orleans public schools in recent years. Researchers have analyzed district suspension data from 2002 to 2013 and found that black students in New Orleans public schools have been 2 to 3 times more likely to be given an out-of-school suspension than their white classmates. Significant efforts have been made to reduce suspensions in New Orleans after a post-Katrina spike. These efforts have yielded improvements, but the 14 percent of black students who received a suspension in 2013 only returns the suspension rate to pre-Katrina levels, and has not solved this challenge for the longer term.⁵³

Implications for Future Policy and Actions

ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Elected school boards provide opportunities for local citizens, through the electorate, to have a voice in education.⁵⁴ Self-appointed charter school boards do not provide this same benefit. While the passage of Act 35 may have ushered in an unprecedented opportunity for sweeping reforms, many in New Orleans remained skeptical of private board governance of public schools and continued to support the full return of schools to local district control.⁵⁵ Organizations such as Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN) emerged during this time and led community hearings to gather data and input from local citizens who were marginalized by not having a voice or vote in matters related to local public education. Political support and public outcry for the return of schools to local control led to the 2016 decision by the Louisiana Legislature to return all Recovery School District charter schools to local school district control by 2018.⁵⁶

A reduction of political power in a majority black city, only two generations after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, raised opposition. Implementing a smooth reorganization of charter schools under the authority of the elected school board and their chosen superintendent will go a long way to rebuilding democratic engagement. Ensuring that the composition of school staffs and charter school boards better reflects the racial demographic of the city will serve this goal as well.

LEVERAGING SCHOOL CHOICE TO PROMOTE INTEGRATION

While overall levels of racial segregation in New Orleans public schools are relatively unchanged, post-Katrina charter school reforms have yielded significant increases in the number of schools that might be referred to as multicultural (schools with no racial/ethnic group representing more than two-thirds of the population).⁵⁷ The number of multicultural schools increased from 8 to 14 between 2004 and 2014, which represents a change from about 5 percent of schools to about 15 percent of schools over a ten year span. As the white and Hispanic population grows, and increased housing costs and gentrification threaten to reshape historic neighborhoods, diverse public schools may serve as important spaces where both old and new residents can interact.⁵⁸ This integration has the potential to fail if white and middle-class families gentrify urban schools and recreate them on their terms, disregarding the students and families who came before.⁵⁹

EXPANDING ACCESS TO PRE-K EDUCATION

Inequitable access to early childhood education has also been identified as a system level challenge in New Orleans. Louisiana's largest public pre-K program (LA4) is targeted towards low-income families and has shown extremely positive academic results, but families have unequal access to early childhood education. Some evidence suggests that in New Orleans, 75 percent of white families are able to access some form of pre-K or kindergarten, while only two-thirds of black or Hispanic families have access.⁶⁰ The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans issued a report in December 2017 suggesting that district decentralization may have led to the drop in the number of pre-K seats in public schools as schools grew concerned about the high cost of pre-K.⁶¹ Sustained commitment from the state of Louisiana to expanding pre-K should be a top educational priority.

Conclusion

This discussion of public education in New Orleans has identified long-standing support for the idea of tax-supported public education. Indeed, the northern democratic ideals of Horace Mann very much influenced the founders of public education in our city.⁶² But based on a legacy of colonialism and chattel slavery, and then de jure and de facto segregation, there has never been a time when all residents of the city participated in the public school system together. The sort of democratic preparation and common school experience that is at the heart of much of our rationale for public schools has never fully taken root in New Orleans. Outcomes have consistently favored white and middle-class families, and the poor and students of color have often attended second-class schools designed (whether wittingly or unwittingly) to deprive future generations of resources and opportunities for upward mobility. Despite generations of educators—black and white alike—working with devotion, we have been unable to create a system of public education that does more to foster social mobility than it does to prop up the existing social hierarchy.

If we are to reform our public school system so that it serves such purposes, it will likely need to enroll a larger percentage of young people than it currently does. A disproportionate share of New Orleans families (about 25 percent) choose private schools, compared to a national average of 10 percent.⁶³ While there are religious and historical reasons for private school choices, it must also be considered that these choices weaken the public education system. Greater participation in the public system would foster the concept of public education as an investment in the future citizens and workers of our city. Recent successful tax levies provide encouraging evidence of increasing support for public schools in our city.⁶⁴

We will also need to take seriously the role of community engagement and democratic control, even if charter schools remain the primary option for most public school families in the short term. Given our legacy of inequality, residents may trust our public education system when they are entrusted meaningfully with its design and operations. The recent moment is one of historically high optimism and attention being paid to public education in New Orleans. If our leaders are willing to create the conditions for sustained improvement, and our citizens are prepared to support them, then the long articulated promise of an accessible, equitable, and high quality public school system is attainable.

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About the Data Center

The Data Center is the most trusted resource for data about greater New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana. Since 1997, The Data Center has been objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

The Data Center (formerly known as the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center) became the local authority for tracking post-Katrina recovery with *The New Orleans Index*, developed in partnership with Brookings Institution.

About The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Collection

The New Orleans Prosperity Index: Tricentennial Collection includes contributions from more than a dozen local scholars. These reports will assess the long reach of historical practices on contemporary policies and practices contributing to today's racial disparities across multiple systems (criminal justice, education, housing, business ownership, health care, etc.), and provide recommendations for furthering future progress. In addition, The Data Center will release a comprehensive set of metrics that address the question: "Have black New Orleanians experienced increased economic inclusion since the end of the Civil Rights era?"

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