

Nearly 20 years later, New Orleans post-Katrina school reforms show gains — but at a cost

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A report by Douglas Harris (pictured) and co-author Jamie Carroll with Tulane University's Education Research Alliance for New Orleans summarizes more than a decade of research into 12 key lessons from the city's sweeping education reforms following Hurricane Katrina nearly 20 years ago. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, one of the worst disasters in U.S. history, New Orleans launched the most ambitious school reform experiment in the nation. Almost 20 years later, a new report offers a complex portrait of progress and trade-offs that education policymakers throughout the country are still scrutinizing.

The [report](#) by Tulane University's [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans](#) summarizes more than a decade of research into 12 key lessons from the city's sweeping education reforms. Those changes were driven largely by the flooding and destruction of many school buildings and a history of underperformance by schools within the traditional system. In the wake of Katrina, the state of Louisiana took over most of the city's schools, resulting in a system where nearly all public schools became charter schools.

The report found that student outcomes improved dramatically following the near-total overhaul of the city's public school system under the new post-Katrina system. Test scores, high school graduation rates and college attendance all rose – sometimes by double digits – after the city shifted almost all public schools to independently operated charter schools governed by performance contracts.

Compared to similar students in other Louisiana districts, students in New Orleans saw test scores increase by up to 16 percentile points, with college entry rates climbing by as much as 15 percentage points and college graduation rates growing by 3-6 percentage points.

“This is one of the largest and most sustained improvements in urban education that we’ve seen,” said [Douglas Harris](#), the report's co-author and director of the alliance.

But the report also underscores the costs of what it called rapid, top-down change.

Following Katrina, the state laid off all public school teachers, dissolved union contracts and eliminated traditional school attendance zones. While this allowed for swift reopening of schools and flexibility for reform, it also dismantled the local education workforce, particularly among Black educators, and eroded trust in some communities, according to the findings.

Though some schools flourished, others saw increases in suspensions, long bus rides for students and declines in teacher experience. Instructional spending fell even as administrative costs rose. Access to pre-K and arts programs suffered in the early years, and the quality of teaching, as reported by students, still lags slightly behind other urban districts.

The city's approach of closing or taking over low-performing schools and reallocating students played a central role in raising academic achievement. But even those moves had limitations. While younger students benefited from such transitions, older high school students often struggled with the disruptions.

One of the starkest warnings in the report is about replicability.

“We likely wouldn’t see the same results elsewhere even if with identical reforms,” said report co-author [Jamie Carroll](#), associate director of research for Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. “Student outcomes improved here partly because they started so low and because New Orleans had additional funding and attracted a flood of new educators.”

Despite gains in access and achievement, racial and economic inequities persist. Students of color continue to report less supportive school environments, and new admissions policies are giving wealthier families easier access to high-performing schools.

With the local school board regaining control from the state in 2018, trust and governance relationships have emerged as critical issues. Recent leadership turnover and funding errors have further strained relationships between schools, families and the district.

Still, Harris said, the New Orleans experience provides valuable insight at a time when school districts nationwide are grappling with learning loss, teacher shortages and persistent achievement gaps.

“New Orleans shows that dramatic change is possible,” he said. “But there are real trade-offs.”

To read the full report, visit www.educationresearchalliancenola.org.

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Douglas Harris, Education Research Alliance for New Orleans