

New Orleans reforms boost student performance

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Before Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans was the second-lowest-ranked district in the second-lowest-ranked state in the country, as measured by student performance on state and national tests. After the hurricane, the city essentially erased its school district and started over. Within the span of one year, all public-school employees were fired, the teacher contract expired and was not replaced, and the state took control of almost all public schools. Eventually the state turned all the schools under its authority over to charter management organizations (CMOs), dramatically reshaping the teacher workforce and providing the first direct test of an alternative to the country's century-old system of school governance.



In three new articles published in *Education Next*, researchers with the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) at Tulane University, directed by professor of economics Douglas Harris, investigate how schools and student performance have responded to the policy shifts since Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

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performance have responded to policy shifts.

In “Good News for New Orleans,” Harris summarizes research conducted with ERA analyst Matthew Larsen, which uses two complementary strategies to determine how the reforms affected student performance on state tests. The analysis first compares the test scores of students who returned to New Orleans after the hurricane to their own performance before the storm. The analysis then compares the performance of different cohorts of students before and after the reforms.

Before the reforms, students in New Orleans performed well below the Louisiana average, at about the 30th percentile statewide. The comparison group also trailed the state average, although to a lesser extent. After the reforms, the performance of New Orleans' students shot upward by 0.2 to 0.4 standard deviations by 2012, enough to improve a typical student's performance by 8 to 15 percentile points. In contrast, the comparison group from other districts largely continued its prior trajectory.

The article describes how reforms changed New Orleans schools and, in particular, their teacher workforce. The percentages of teachers with regular certification and with 20 or more years of experience both dropped by about 20 points. The teacher turnover rate also nearly doubled, apparently because schools had greater autonomy over personnel and because of the increase in educators from alternative preparation programs such as Teach for America.

This article, along with “Many Options in New Orleans Choice System” and “The New Orleans OneApp,” appear in the fall 2015 issue of [*Education Next*](#).