



## **New Orleans Considers Making All Public Schools Charters**

*New Orleans may become the first large U.S. city to replace its traditional public school system entirely with charter schools.*

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New Orleans may become the first large U.S. city to replace its traditional public school system entirely with charter schools, pending the Orleans Parish School Board's consideration of local interest in chartering the district's remaining schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately managed schools held to higher accountability standards than traditional public schools in exchange for increased flexibility in other areas.

Henderson Lewis Jr., superintendent of Orleans Parish Schools, published a statement in December 2016 saying he had "received expressions of interest from the current principals of our remaining five network elementary and high schools to convert to Type 3 charter schools," beginning in the 2017–18 school year.

Lewis announced the school board would inform families and school staff of the possible conversion to charters, but he provided no other details.

"If the decision proceeds, it will have been a long time coming," Nola.com reported after Lewis' statement. "In 2014, the Louisiana Recovery School District finished converting to charters all the New Orleans public schools it took over after Hurricane Katrina."

### **Ending ZIP-Code Learning**

Ann Duplessis, president of the Louisiana Federation for Children, says an all-charter city would break long-established barriers to education choice.

“The conversion to all-charter schools means that all parents and students in New Orleans can choose quality educational options,” Duplessis said. “For the first time in a major American city, a parent won’t have to send their child to a school just because it’s in their ZIP code.”

### **‘Bottom-Up Evolution’**

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says New Orleans’ charter schools have been given a unique opportunity to prove their value.

“I think it is a bottom-up evolution,” McCluskey said. “To a much greater extent than in other places, charters [in New Orleans] were not seen as a threat to existing public schools, because those schools had already been wiped out, and schools arose to meet demand as the city recovered.

“The more that schools can specialize in the needs of unique subsets of children and families and the more they are able and required to compete with one another, the better it is for families,” McCluskey said. “They can more easily get the education best for their unique children, and they don’t have to rely on a glacial political process to make changes to schools that aren’t working.”

### **Charters ‘Accountable to Parents’**

Duplessis says charter schools are held to a higher standard than traditional public schools.

“Louisiana’s charter schools are accountable to parents and taxpayers,” Duplessis said. “Charter schools are held to high academic, financial, and organizational standards. The state’s letter-grade system is transparent and allows parents to know how each school is performing. If a charter school’s performance is consistently low, it is shut down.”

Charters operate in a manner similar to private-sector businesses, Duplessis says.

“Governance and administration is under the jurisdiction of the Orleans Parish School Board,” Duplessis said. “At the same time, each school has an autonomous board in place that has a say in each school’s curriculum, personnel, and budgeting. Charter schools’ hiring decisions are made at the school level. Teachers and principals choose to work in their school rather than being assigned by a school district. Charter school workers consider the same employment factors as those in the private sector, including salary, curriculum, school leadership, and location.”

### **‘Parents Were Demanding Change’**

Duplessis says charters are making parents’ educational wishes come true.

“Unfortunately, this community had to go through the experience of a failed public school system,” Duplessis said. “When I was elected to the state Senate in 2004, parents were demanding changes to a system that was corrupt, disorganized, and dysfunctional. We were beginning to enact meaningful education reform when New Orleans and Louisiana were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. While Hurricane Katrina accelerated the reform movement, I believe this transformation would have occurred, although not as quickly. Parents were

demanding change, as was the business community. There was a realization that the state's economy would not grow without meaningful education reform.”