

Creating Recovery School Districts to Drive Reforms: Lessons from Louisiana

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This summer, New Jersey's recently appointed Acting Commissioner of Education Christopher Cerf received some sobering but not altogether unexpected information on the performance of his department. Almost 75% of the state's superintendents felt that the New Jersey Department of Education "did not play an important role in helping districts raise students' achievement or prepare graduates for college and careers." If the State Department of Education (SDE) isn't helping districts to raise student achievement, what has it been doing and, more importantly, what does it need to do to be a leader in the state's educational improvement efforts?

Changing the role of the state

In a 2008 report, Hill, Roza, and Harvey argued that to support educational improvement SDEs need to reposition themselves as performance managers overseeing districts with the principles of continuous improvement, instead of regulators who dole out resources and ensure program compliance.¹

Unfortunately, when it comes to creating an environment that fosters continuous improvement, many states have moved very cautiously—adopting a charter school law only to limit the number of charter schools permitted to operate or establishing accountability systems that ultimately have no bite.

In Louisiana, however, Hurricane Katrina forced the state's hand. Orleans Parish schools—a system that had already failed for years—were nearly destroyed. The Recovery School District (RSD), established by the state years earlier, came to the plate. In cooperation with a variety of new, local nonprofits, the RSD leadership set about establishing a portfolio of high-quality schools for New Orleans students.

Now six years later, the RSD's landmark efforts to rebuild New Orleans schools are posting impressive gains. Student academic progress in RSD schools outpaced gains made in the rest of the state's schools in each of the last four years. RSD schools in New Orleans posted an historic 25% improvement in this time.

Today, states across the country are looking at Louisiana's experience to figure out how to build their own RSD. Here are some of the key lessons Louisiana's leaders offered their fellow state leaders in a recent meeting on the progress of the RSD.²

Lessons from Louisiana

Before you start:

1. Establish an accountability system that is rational and reliably identifies persistently underperforming schools. You must also build the data systems required for implementation.
2. Leave some room in your accountability system to account for factors other than hard numbers on achievement. Figure out how to assess factors such as school trends and the organizational climate for change.
3. Make the state a magnet for the nation's best talent by establishing policies that give school leaders the opportunity to build their own team, reward success, and incentivize the best to take on the toughest jobs.
4. Establish an agency that has the authority to seize control of, transform, or convert unproductive schools to charters.

Prepare mentally

1. Proceed with careful measure in closing schools. Make sure you have clear criteria for closure and transformation. Remember that transformation is hard and requires active monitoring that uses state capacity, so don't overdo it. Bungled transformations can kill the reform initiative.
2. Expect opposition to school closure, transformation, and replacement and be prepared to convince those parties that haven't made up their minds.

Recognize the limits of RSD-style reforms

1. RSD-style actions are more credible and sustainable when focused on a large metropolitan area with large numbers of low-performing schools where there is a critical mass of need and talent to sustain the work.
2. Taking over schools in rural towns and small cities will be very difficult.
3. The state entity overseeing schools can't do everything, so contracting out some administrative and support functions to third parties will be necessary.

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¹ Paul Hill, Marguerite Roza, and James Harvey, "Facing the Future: Financing Productive Schools," (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education Report Series, 2008).

² Paul Hill and Patrick J. Murphy, "On Recovery School Districts and Stronger State Education Agencies: Lessons from Louisiana," (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, July 2011).