



Roots of Engagement in Baton Rouge:

How Community Is Shaping the Growth
of New School Options

Acknowledgments

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

Cover photo: Baton Rouge Bridge Academy Public Charter School

Foreword

Too often, well-intended systemic school reform initiatives in this country have been largely top-down affairs. Typical community engagement in these efforts might include holding meetings with residents, community groups, and families to solicit buy-in for plans and changes already well underway. But the deeper work of building relationships over time, through trust and understanding with the intended beneficiaries of those system changes, has been largely bypassed in favor of urgency. Many communities have experienced reform as something done “to” them or “for” them—not “with” them. And cities have paid a price for it.

Reform efforts in cities like New York City, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans have led to improved school options and better outcomes for more students. But the pace and shape of the reforms were wrenching for all involved and each of these cities carries some legacy of bitterness and mistrust around how reforms played out. The turnover of familiar teachers, the shuttering of iconic school buildings and shuttling of children away from neighborhood schools, and the loss of middle-class jobs in central offices most often impacted communities of color. In response, many black education leaders say education reform needs “an attitude adjustment.”

At a 2015 Center on Reinventing Public Education meeting at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, Pastor Raymond Jetson of Star Hill Church in Baton Rouge [explained to a group of education reform leaders](#): “There are legitimate emotions, loyalties, and alliances that may at times seem to be at odds with your assumptions and efforts. The elementary school I went to is closed. The middle and high school I went to are in the Recovery School District. There were more students in my graduating class than were on the campus of my high school last year. When a revolving door of new leaders come out of nowhere and tell me what’s in the best interest of Capitol High School but have not done the work to know its past... It would be difficult to explain to you the level of resentment that I have felt.”

At that same meeting, Ken Campbell, founding board member of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, argued that long-term sustainability of school reform requires taking the time to really understand and engage a community while maintaining a sense of urgency on behalf of students. He asked: “How do we convince reform leaders and funders of the importance of engaging the community and doing it in deep and authentic ways?”

This paper looks at the community engagement efforts underway in one city—Baton Rouge, Louisiana—where a diverse group of well-connected civic leaders are working to create high-quality new public charter and private school options, primarily in neighborhoods with failing or low-performing schools. Through the nonprofit organization New Schools for Baton Rouge (NSBR), they are working to embed community engagement in everything from vetting and recruiting school operators, to building a local pipeline of teachers who look like the students they serve, to striving to deliver what the community itself defines as an “excellent” school. Despite an undisputed sense of urgency on behalf of students, NSBR is taking the time to forge relationships from the neighborhood on up, recognizing that schools are not just places where students are educated and outcomes earned, but places that play a role in the neighborhood economy and community life.

We’ll be watching the progress in Baton Rouge to see whether the roots of engagement take hold and endure, and what lessons there may be for other cities.

Christine Campbell

Policy Director and Senior Research Analyst
Center on Reinventing Public Education



Pastor Raymond Jetson,
addressing the
Portfolio Strategy Network,
January 2015

“
Transformative change requires transformative relationships. Transformative relationships are not easily achieved. You can’t merely stop by and have a conversation with me. You can’t just invite me to your major production at your school. You can’t come and visit with me at my church and then declare that we have a relationship sufficient of the hard work that is changing the education and life outcomes of inner-city children. The relationship has to go much deeper together than that. And so it requires an investment of your time. It requires a transparency in your demeanor. It requires an integrity to your work in order to create long-term, broad-based and deeply rooted change.”

—*Pastor Raymond Jetson*

ROOTS OF ENGAGEMENT IN BATON ROUGE: HOW COMMUNITY IS SHAPING THE GROWTH OF NEW SCHOOL OPTIONS

Denese Hawkins says she does not care whether her son, Albert, attends a traditional public school run by the local school district, an independent charter school, or a private school. She cares that he is 14 years old and in 6th grade after being held back in his local district school. She cares that sometimes he has spent more time out of school on suspension than in school learning. She cares that her son does not give up on himself and that his teachers do not write him off either.

“My son needs to get his education and believe in himself to overcome any obstacle,” Hawkins says. “That’s what I want for him.”

The Hawkins are one of roughly 130 families who have chosen Democracy Prep public charter school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Democracy Prep is one of seven charter schools to date given financial and strategic support by New Schools for Baton Rouge (NSBR). This civic-led nonprofit was

founded in 2012 initially to create new public charter and private school options in underserved neighborhoods in Baton Rouge.

Many cities over the past decade have followed a largely top-down, government-led road to reform and have struggled to authentically engage communities, often triggering community backlash. NSBR is trying something different, as a coalition of well-connected black and white civic leaders striving to establish deep community relationships and embed community connections into its reform plans so changes can be made with the community rather than to it. NSBR is not the only group trying to improve education in Baton Rouge—there are others trying to drive improvements within the system. However, this paper focuses on NSBR’s community-based work to create new options outside the existing school system.

The Challenge in Baton Rouge

Leaders at Democracy Prep, which launched in fall 2015 in north Baton Rouge, say they see the legacy of their area’s struggling schools: their 6th graders have come in, on average, two years below grade level, often even lower in reading.

The East Baton Rouge Parish (EBR) school district—where nearly 80 percent of its 42,000-plus students are black and 84 percent live in poverty—was party to one of the nation’s longest-running desegregation lawsuits, starting in 1956 with federal oversight of the desegregation plan that ended in 2007. Three breakaway districts wound up carving out many of the parish’s white students in the early 2000s, while a fourth breakaway effort narrowly failed



Baton Rouge College Preparatory
Public Charter School

in 2015. Multiple efforts to elect reform-minded school board members and superintendents and otherwise change inputs in the school system have not led to fundamentally improved outcomes. Graduation rates persist [below the state average](#). Although the EBR Parish school system is rated C overall (a school is rated C if about 45 percent of its students are performing on grade level), most of north Baton Rouge’s open-enrollment public schools are rated D or F. While the district has its own public charter schools and successful magnet and gifted and talented programs, many Baton Rouge families have opted out, with an estimated 25 percent of students in nonpublic schools.

The state supports private school choice in several ways by offering a nonpublic school scholarship, or voucher, program (for which family demand has outstripped supply), as well as by extending tuition and private school expense tax deductions to families and tax rebates to taxpayers who donate tuition funds to tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations (such as NSBR) that help students from lower-income families pay for private schools. But existing private school quality is “mixed at best,” says NSBR chief executive director Chris Meyer, a Louisiana native and former deputy superintendent at the Recovery School District. The state has sanctioned several schools in the voucher program for poor student performance.

“This city is going to a decentralized model,” says Meyer, pointing to the repeated breakaway efforts and the large private school population. “That train is out of the station.”

The state-run Recovery School District (RSD) took over 11 failing schools from 2007 to 2010, mainly in north Baton Rouge, and appealed to local leaders to take them on and turn them around as public charter schools. The local chapter of 100 Black Men, Advance Baton Rouge (a local nonprofit), and Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church stepped up to help. None of these groups had experience managing or running a school; all had little time to plan before opening—some had two months or less.

The schools foundered and the local groups turned their charters back to the state when it became clear they would not meet the performance threshold for renewal. The schools were then either closed or directly run by the RSD, leaving some north Baton

Rouge families feeling frustrated and disenfranchised amid the shuffle. In 2011, State Superintendent John White (the former RSD chief) called together three dozen Baton Rouge community leaders to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, including many individuals who were involved in the failed charters, to discuss steps to improve education in Baton Rouge, specifically north Baton Rouge. New Schools for Baton Rouge grew out of that meeting and took on the immediate task of finding and vetting qualified school operators to take on the RSD schools in north Baton Rouge.

“The community groups here took on a great risk in running schools,” Meyer says. “And when it didn’t work out, rather than throw up their hands and walk away, Baton Rouge then leveraged that experience.” But after the shuffle of the RSD turnaround efforts, trust must be earned back over time with results and deliberate community building, he says. “People don’t trust the schools

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yet. Our work is toward ‘how do we all feel ownership of the schools?’ And people need to know—and see—you’re not just here for a hot minute.”

But the political context for NSBR’s work to provide high-quality school options may shift. EBR Parish has a new, well-regarded school superintendent, Warren Drake, who has vowed to “[change the way we do business in Baton Rouge](#).” The fall 2015 elections ushered in a new state school board that is expected to continue to support school choice policies and a new Democratic governor, who (in a marked departure from his Republican predecessor) is seen as a critic of vouchers and school choice.

While it’s New Orleans that has dominated national headlines for its massive, rapid-fire school decentralization in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Baton Rouge, the state’s second-biggest city, is charting its own fledgling path following a mantra that, for now, calls for “going slow to go fast.” Baton Rouge has just over 20 public charter schools total, unlike New Orleans where public charter schools make up the bulk of the system. Through NSBR and other initiatives, the community is seeking to play a large role in improving school quality in Baton Rouge.

A New Approach to Education Reform

Cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago have led reform efforts over the past decade through local government actors. In these cities, a visionary mayor and a reform-minded school superintendent tackled declining or stagnant student outcomes by closing down low-performing schools, hiring new leaders and teachers from alternative pipelines, opening public charter schools and giving families choices. These leaders struggled to genuinely engage families and communities in the reforms, reaching out too late and aiming to garner buy-in to changes already under way. In the end, they have faced fierce opposition from the very communities they hoped would benefit from their efforts.

Baton Rouge stands out for trying a different approach from the efforts described above and in response to the Louisiana state RSD’s failed attempt to turn around some Baton Rouge schools. Growing from the ashes of that work, NSBR is a group of well-connected black and white community leaders stepping up to lead the reform charge in their city. NSBR is recruiting public and nonpublic school operators with a proven track record of student achievement and working to support new public and private school options. NSBR’s strategy relies on the organization and the schools it supports to develop authentic community relationships

that are built to last: relationships built on trust and real understanding that may, over time, help bridge longstanding race and class divides in the city. In Baton Rouge, like other cities, issues around who gets to speak for “the community” and who holds power over the direction of school change can be contentious. Unlike the narrative in many cities—where white reformers impose change on largely black communities—in Baton Rouge black leaders have been at the table from the get-go.

These Baton Rouge leaders acknowledge that some local backlash is unavoidable and lock-step consensus unattainable. But they hope that their effort to work with the community in creating new school options that fit community needs will result in a less fractious environment than other cities have faced, cities such as [Indianapolis, IN](#), [Oakland, CA](#), [Memphis, TN](#), and [Newark, N.J.](#)

For now, what’s clear is the NSBR community leaders have decided not to wait for local or state government to transform the city’s education landscape. Whether Baton Rouge families will ultimately feel reform is being done with them—and how successful or replicable NSBR’s strategy proves to be—remains to be seen. But Baton Rouge’s efforts may yield relevant lessons for other cities.



Pastor Raymond Jetson,
Star Hill Church

A “Community Compact” for Excellent Schools

Raymond Jetson, the prominent pastor of the 1,300-member Star Hill Church and a founding NSBR board member, as well as a state legislator and fellow with Harvard University’s Advanced Leadership Institute, has played a key role building community relationships and helping define community objectives. Working from the premise that authentic community engagement can happen only if education

reformers and education consumers genuinely understand each other, Jetson in 2010 invited a wide range of players in the education sandbox (including Stand for Children, East Baton Rouge Parish school board members, the state Recovery School District, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and community members who later became NSBR board members) and a group of students, parents, community members, and retired educators to discuss what makes for excellent education. What emerged was a “gulf between what the grassroots people talked about and what the education wonks talked about; there could not have been a greater divide.” This showed Jetson a clear need for common language and trust building.

Through his nonprofit MetroMorphosis, Jetson launched the [Our Schools, Our Excellence](#) (OSOE) initiative in 2012,

defined as “...a community-led movement of MetroMorphosis with a single purpose: to create an informed community demand for excellent educational and life outcomes for children in north Baton Rouge. We realize in order to engage our community to become active in the well-being of students, change must come from within. Secondly, an informed community demand is necessary to build long-term change in urban education.”

Hundreds of community members participated in meetings across north Baton Rouge to collectively define what makes an “excellent” school, finally arriving at four research-based principles they felt would make the biggest impact: achieve student success; recruit, reward, and empower proven talent; engage parents; and support students. These four principles became the Community

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Baton Rouge Bridge Academy Public Charter School

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Compact, whose tenets NSBR asks school operators to meet and which Jetson intends to help inform all actors in Baton Rouge’s education landscape. The compact has garnered some 2,000 signatures to date. (See the Community Compact at the end of this report.)

Says Jetson: “What we have tried to make certain is happening here is that the community gets to say what reform or excellence means to them. We became totally agnostic to model. Our agenda was whatever type of school it is by whoever runs it, that school needs to embody these four principles.”

Jetson says the compact was not produced for NSBR but rather to inform all actors in Baton Rouge’s education landscape, including the EBR Parish school system. While NSBR to date has not worked directly with EBR, Jetson and his group have. “It’s not realistic to think all caregivers will exercise choice, so we need to make the school system good too,” Jetson says.

The compact process was an attempt to give voice to core community concerns about schools—concerns that largely sidestepped debate over governance models.

“Members of the educational industrial complex engaged in these arguments about models and governance, and so it was ‘Charters are good and they must be run by the state,’ or ‘It must be run by the district.’ Those were the arguments,” Jetson

says, noting that families were largely left out of the picture. “The people in the community became pawns in somebody else’s agenda....And parents and community members were left without a voice in terms of what mattered most, which is, ‘When my child walks on the school campus, can I expect good things to happen?’”

While OSOE seeks to empower parents and community members to advocate for what they want and need, Jetson says education reform in Baton Rouge is not yet led by the community.

“The work we have done has not at this point in time created a broad-based grassroots demand for excellent public schools,” Jetson says. “I believe we’re trending in that direction...[But] there’s still a great deal of work and time that has to transpire.”

While NSBR cites the compact as evidence of community demand for school choice, the compact itself does not mention choice. For his part, Jetson says, “I strongly believe in parents having the opportunity to make a choice. So while I don’t adhere to the position that the only way to do that is to make every school a charter, I do think different options should be available.” That said, Jetson says the OSOE compact convenings were “as close as we’ve come to a conversation that was not about advancing a specific agenda at the beginning.”

Although Jetson supports NSBR’s mission, he recently stepped down from its board to

make clear that OSOE is a separate effort. “I didn’t want the work with OSOE to be understood as some effort clandestinely in service to NSBR,” he says. “I didn’t want it to be usurped or misunderstood by anyone or to create suspicion or rejection on the part of the community.”

New Schools for Baton Rouge

Established in 2012, NSBR has raised \$24 million to help schools get off the ground. According to the organization, 75 percent has come from in-state donors, including \$10 million from the Louisiana Department of Education. NSBR also works to build a pipeline of educator talent, remove barriers to accessing quality facilities, and create an education landscape that sees the school as the unit of change, granting schools autonomy in exchange for being held accountable for student results.

NSBR sees community connections as key to the long-term success of its mission, which is to recruit public and nonpublic school operators with a proven track record of student achievement to Baton Rouge and ultimately improve school options along the 70-mile corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, where 50 percent of all state-rated D and F schools sit.



New Schools for Baton Rouge staff

The initial goal is to create 12,000 high-quality seats by 2017 for north Baton Rouge, an area of predominantly black, poor neighborhoods with many D- and F-rated schools. Then NSBR plans to expand options citywide to an estimated 18,000 underserved students. Launching a facilities support fund to create potential lease-to-own options is expected to enable growth.

The aim, says Chris Meyer, is to build successful schools that become community institutions. NSBR’s seven schools (none older than a year) serve some 1,700 students to date; two schools are slated to open in August 2016, and eleven more will be added between 2017 and 2018.

Given the newness of NSBR’s schools, state test results are not yet available. At UP Elementary, 84 percent of kindergartners did not know how to hold a book or read 10 letters from the alphabet in fall 2014.

By year's end, 90 percent were reading at a 1st grade level. Some NSBR schools have waitlists in select grades, and teacher retention is growing.

As to community relationships, Meyer says, "If reformers keep relying on a Superman leader, you'll see the same movie over and over. It's the wrong strategy. You'd better have civic partners within the micro community and the macro community to plow and till the soil." He says while New Orleans in its reform didn't sufficiently engage the institutions that help stabilize the city, in Baton Rouge those institutions and individuals are the ones driving the reform.

CONNECTED WITH THE COMMUNITY

NSBR board members are influential leaders in the Baton Rouge business, education, and religious communities. They include leaders from the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, pastors of predominantly black churches, a co-founder of City Year (an AmeriCorps program), a prominent lawyer who heads the alumni federation at Southern University (a historically black university), and a former director of the Louisiana education department's office of charter schools who also served as a founding board member and former president of the national Black Alliance for Educational Options.

NSBR is taking deliberate steps to embed community connection into the reform process by:

- Building relationships from the neighborhood level up.
- Staffing thoughtfully, both inside the organization by hiring a well-networked community affairs lead with solid neighborhood ties, and in the schools it supports by working to build a local pipeline of strong black teachers and leaders.
- Involving key civic institutions and prominent black leaders from the start.
- Being willing to openly address issues around race as they emerge.
- Inviting parents and community—including skeptics—to help vet schools and collaborate on emerging projects.
- Asking its schools to follow the Community Compact.

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Selecting School Operators and Assessing “Fit”

School operators applying for NSBR support must demonstrate a proven student achievement record (NSBR uses a metric similar to that used by the Charter School Growth Fund to assess this) and detail how they will meet the Community Compact terms.

“We screen nationally for organizations that have not just improved student performance, but have done so over and over again,” says Bing Howell, who runs the NSBR growth strategy. This process doesn’t always cut the community’s way, however. Some black community members were upset when Friendship Public Charter School, a popular black-led charter management organization (CMO) from Washington, D.C., that runs Capitol High School for the RSD, didn’t hit the performance bar to receive NSBR funds.

Once past performance checks out, operators are vetted for community “fit” and their ability to customize for Baton Rouge. NSBR links prospective operators with community members and groups so each can ask questions, field concerns, and ascertain that fit.

“We want them to understand our local context,” Howell says, noting that NSBR ideally builds in at least one planning year

“The give and take of relationship-building is a delicate thing, and approaching it with thoughtfulness and support is the only way to do it. We still worry about our reception, of course, and it’s on us to build community trust.”

after funding an operator, in part to solidify community connections. It’s not unusual for potential operators to start meeting community members several years before opening. Chris Meyer says some school openings have been delayed to allow for building stronger community ties.

Ben Marcovitz, CEO of the CMO Collegiate Academies, started meeting Baton Rouge community members in 2012 ahead of an anticipated fall 2017 school opening. Marcovitz credits NSBR with making community links earlier and stronger than he experienced in New Orleans, where Collegiate runs three high schools. “Us being new [to Baton Rouge], the give and take of relationship-building is a delicate thing, and approaching it with thoughtfulness and support is the only way to do it,” he says. “We still worry about our reception, of course, and it’s on us to build community trust.”

JoAnn Gama of IDEA Public Schools, with 44 schools in south Texas, had been openly skeptical about her CMO’s fit for Baton Rouge. The CMO is considering opening a school in 2018.

“I had concerns I bluntly put out there. We’ve achieved extraordinary results with the students we serve in South and Central Texas, predominantly low-income Hispanic students on the border. While we believe that our model and culture are well suited to all high-need student populations, these communities are very different. Baton Rouge has issues of generational poverty that we haven’t experienced before. It’s also a predominantly African American student population. We can’t assume what works in Texas is going to work in Baton Rouge; that’s been my concern,” she says. “After so many generations of promises not coming to fruition, there is a deeper level of disenfranchisement in the Baton Rouge African American community.”

She adds, “Because we’re often getting courted by people who don’t look like the people we serve, it is vital to connect with the communities our schools would actually serve.”

Gama says she consistently heard through her own contacts that recruitment would be tough because of the prior charter failures. But she says her Baton Rouge visit allayed some concerns. Through NSBR, she met with Democracy Prep parents. “They painted a really compelling picture of what families need and aren’t getting right now” in the school system. She also independently arranged to meet community leaders through 100 Black Men. “One woman, you could tell she was a little sour on the charters, asked ‘Do you work with black kids?’ And the president of the [100 Black Men] chapter said ‘If you have a program that works there [in Texas], it can work here. Kids are kids.’ And that’s what I needed to hear.”

As to customizing schools for Baton Rouge, Howell relays how one out-of-state operator in a much bigger city relied on such a selective staffing model that they hired just 2 percent of the teacher applicants. Baton Rouge simply isn’t big enough to support that. So the game plan became recruiting Teach For America alumni with Baton Rouge links. “It was ‘come back to the city you love and make a difference for the kid you always wanted to teach and get the PD [professional development] you want,’” Howell says.

“Because we’re often getting courted by people who don’t look like the people we serve, it is vital to connect with the communities our schools would actually serve.”

Gama says IDEA, for its part, has a tight model. “Our success is directly attributable to our ability to effectively replicate our instructional model. ‘This is the curriculum, this is the staffing model, this is how many kids we take.’ Our schools all share these characteristics because they create a learning environment that gets results for students.” But Gama knows Baton Rouge will require tweaks, including more school-based counseling support and a school-based community liaison—something NSBR strongly recommends but doesn’t require.

Formalizing Community Connections

As NSBR’s community affairs lead, Gwen Hamilton taps her deep community connections to help schools fill the key community liaison role with people like “Big Al” Barone, the liaison for UP Elementary.

Barone, who grew up near the school, doesn’t just knock on doors to recruit students. He’s the one parents call if they need better housing, access to a food bank or workforce development programs, or a ride to get a copy of their child’s birth certificate. Hamilton, a north Baton Rouge



“Big Al” Barone recruiting students for Up Elementary in Baton Rouge
(Credit: Amy Jeffries, southerneddesk.org)

native and EBR Parish graduate who for years has worked in city-parish and state government on community development and education, including as an education advisor to former Gov. Mike Foster, also helps schools map nearby community assets, connect with neighborhood leaders, and build their boards.

NSBR has explored becoming a local charter school authorizer, which prompted them to establish a community schools committee to better formalize the community's role. It is intended, Meyer says, as a "hyper-local community-appointed presence" to make the process more responsive to the community. The group will continue to meet with NSBR and with schools interested in coming to Baton Rouge, regardless of whether NSBR moves to become an authorizer.

In December 2015, some 20 invitees from local community colleges, churches, and groups such as Stand for Children, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Baton Rouge, and the Children's Coalition of Greater Baton Rouge gathered to hear NSBR's pitch to get involved in the community schools committee, serve on an NSBR school's governing board, or share community perspectives when prospective school operators visit Baton Rouge.

Heads nod when Hamilton mentions Pastor Jetson's name and OSOE, the Community Compact, and the notion of changing communities from within. Talking about

potential school operators, she tells them: "It's not a given they'll choose Baton Rouge. It's also not a given Baton Rouge will choose them... They don't want to just meet with people who've drunk the Kool-Aid."

Following the session, Mauretta Wailes Elbert, a former EBR Parish principal and a current practitioner advisor at a resource center that offers educator workshops, training, and alternative certification across the public and private sectors (and Hamilton's long-time friend), says she sees NSBR's outreach as genuine. "I saw some of the right people in the room," she says. Elbert plans to participate in some way but says she will remain skeptical "until I see some data that says these charters coming in are putting these kids where they say they're going to put them."

While the event was invitation only, Meyer says he sees membership in the community school committee as "unlimited." Both he and Hamilton encouraged attendees to recruit others, including "skeptics," for future gatherings. Hamilton plans to hold future meetings reaching out to parents.

Ultimately, what will make the Community Compact more than a piece of paper is the degree to which schools are able to eventually meet its tenets and be held accountable for doing so.

Striving to Live Out the Community Compact at School

Michelle Gieg, who runs Baton Rouge's Democracy Prep elementary and middle schools, says she is striving to deliver on the Community Compact. Based in New York City, Democracy Prep's stated "no excuses" mission is "to educate responsible citizen-scholars for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship."

Gieg has Louisiana bona fides: she went to high school about an hour away from Baton Rouge, graduated from Louisiana State University, and taught with Teach For America at a now-shuttered elementary school about a mile from her campus, one of the failed RSD turnarounds. With Democracy Prep, Gieg is looking to make good on her vow to return to the neighborhood with a high-quality school.

The north Baton Rouge campus opened with 6th grade and kindergarten in August 2015 and enrolls 135 students; all but one meet the federal poverty criteria for receiving free or reduced-price meals. Gieg is working to strike a balance between being responsive to the community but not bending on expectations. Parents sign a family "commitment to excellence" agreement that details caregiver responsibilities for supporting their child in school. "We want to hold families highly accountable for the

expectations they signed up for, but also make sure that they feel heard and valued and supported. And that can be very hard to do both well and at the same time,” she says.

Gieg holds regular coffee meetings with families where she solicits feedback on school policies. Parents of Democracy Prep students have all teacher and staff cell phone numbers and are expected to use them. Gieg wants to start parent leadership training and is working to launch a family leadership council where parents and caregivers can advocate on behalf of other parents and the school. While no Democracy Prep parents serve on the school’s governing board, whose tasks are budgetary and compliance oriented, all meetings are open. Social worker William Carter was a key hire, who, among his myriad tasks, connects families to needed services and runs a mentoring program for middle-school boys. As a black male, Carter is seen as a role model by many.

Gieg wants Democracy Prep to be a primarily neighborhood school—most recruitment has been within a five-mile radius—and an institution that strengthens the neighborhood and its economy. Jetson says that while school reformers around the country generally talk about focusing on what’s good for kids and not adults, ignoring the real issues of jobs and economic links to community is a mistake.

“The education reform movement misses the opportunity to build allies in the

Ignoring the real issues of jobs and economic links to community is a mistake.

economies of the process and in the staffing and leadership of those processes. The operators and those who come into the community need to understand that it is beyond simply ‘we want to do a good job with your kids.’ You have to build the relationships that are mutually beneficial,” Jetson says. “When your back-room finances and other inner workings are done by some third party somewhere far removed and the accountant and the bookkeeper and the local vendors in those neighborhoods



Democracy Prep Baton Rouge
Public Charter School

“The operators and those who come into the community need to understand that it is beyond simply ‘we want to do a good job with your kids.’ You have to build the relationships that are mutually beneficial.”

are totally excluded in participating in the economics of your enterprise, then how do they become invested in what you are doing? Many things, if we're not careful, wind up excluding people from a process while at the same time you are saying 'this is good for you,'" which feels disingenuous.

Gieg intentionally uses a uniform vendor around the corner and a north Baton Rouge family-run company for landscaping, maintenance, and custodial services.

For their part, Democracy Prep parents and caregivers Denese Hawkins, Helen Mott, and Lisa Irby say they haven't heard of the Community Compact. But they say they wanted a school that focused on learning, minimized "foolishness," offered a family-like environment of supports to help make that learning possible, and valued their voices. They also say governance model (traditional public, private, or public charter) is irrelevant to them.

"For me it's more what's happening academically," says Irby, who didn't finish college but has been socking away tuition for her 6th-grade daughter, Arleese, since the day she was born. "If the school is failing, whether it's private, charter, or whatever, that's not going to help my child." Irby likes the notion of the parent and school being "under contract with each other." And where she didn't feel so connected to her daughter's district elementary school, she

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does at Democracy Prep. "I come here like I own it."

Mott is helping raise her 6th-grade great-granddaughter, I'Kuriya, just as she helped raise her eight younger siblings in north Baton Rouge. Mott retired several years ago from packing and shipping sandwiches at a commissary. Her education ended after high school; she wants more for I'Kuriya. In her district school, Mott says, "kids were playing in the classroom, talking. There isn't any of that over here. It doesn't matter to me what kind of school it is as long as [I'Kuriya] does what she needs to do learning-wise and respect-wise."

Hawkins says her whole family is supported at school. As a single mom on disability support, she often struggles financially. Democracy Prep has connected Hawkins with help when her electricity was going to be shut off, with counseling services, and with transportation—and, Hawkins says, the school follows up to make sure she and her 6th-grade son, Albert, get what they

need. Hawkins sees her son's behavior and academics improving: as a 6th grader, he came to Democracy Prep reading around a kindergarten level and is now on track to be on grade level by year's end. "Here, the whole team is behind him," Hawkins says. "And parents are part of the team."

Seeking Quality Local Talent That Reflects the Community

NSBR aims to build a pipeline of quality teachers and talent in ways that consciously support hiring locally—and hiring more teachers and staff who look like the students they serve. "It matters if you're from Louisiana," in terms of long-term teacher retention, cost, and "fit," says Ashley Heard, who heads up NSBR's talent strategy.

Meyer adds: “It’s the intersection of that conversation about, how do you have really high-quality proven operators that are not bringing busloads or plane loads of people” from outside to work in Baton Rouge schools. “Nobody wants to say ‘this is the percentage you need of local versus non-local or African American versus white.’ But I think it’s acknowledging this as an issue on the front end,” he says.

NSBR works with national partners, such as Teach For America, TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project), and City Year to help schools staff up, particularly in their initial start-up years. NSBR is also working with those partners to boost recruitment of local applicants and people of color, Heard says, as well as retain teachers in the long term.

The idea is to help local institutions like Louisiana State University, Southern University, and Relay Graduate School of Education (which may launch in Baton

Rouge as early as fall 2016) provide most of the novice teaching talent for NSBR schools by 2020. NSBR aims to foster collaboration among all talent partners, from candidate recruitment and matriculation to professors teaching across programs. NSBR is working with TNTP and Relay to help retain talent over the long term through programs such as Relay’s National Principal Academy Fellowship.

“The driving question is, how can we use the assets we already have here in Baton Rouge?” Heard says. “Whether you’re a 55-year-old paraprofessional who knows this community inside and out or a 22-year-old college grad from Baton Rouge, we want to make sure there is a way for you to become a great teacher in this city.”

School-by-school statistics are unavailable, but anecdotally it appears that NSBR schools are not stacked with fresh-from-college Teach For America corps teachers, although many are alumni. The three schools that

Los Angeles-based CMO Celerity Schools took over from the RSD are demographic outliers, Heard says. Some 90 percent of Celerity’s teachers are black, as are all three principals; roughly one-third of the schools’ staff stayed on in the transition from RSD to Celerity. One popular principal has stayed in her role since Advance Baton Rouge ran the school. Her campus has the highest enrollment it has seen in years, Meyer says. Anthony Dennis, Stand for Children’s Baton Rouge director, says: “Parents don’t know what state the CMO comes from or who the executive director is. When they see that the principal or teacher is from the community, there’s more trust.”

Celerity has used a largely homegrown talent approach, hiring paraprofessionals or Head Start workers and getting them on-ramped for credentialing. Usually new teachers struggle with classroom management, says Craig Knotts, Celerity Louisiana’s regional vice president and superintendent. But in Baton Rouge, “the

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cultural match was there and the respect level [between students and teachers] was there,” so Celerity could focus on working with the new teachers on pedagogy and instruction. Gieg of Democracy Prep would like to hire more black teachers; she has been able to meet her goal of having half of her staff be people of color.

At least two other NSBR schools slated for opening in 2016 have black leaders at the helm, including the Baton Rouge campus of Chicago-based Cristo Rey, a Catholic, college-prep high school network for underrepresented urban youth.

Who Gets to Speak for “Community”? Moving Beyond Engagement to Empowerment

For all NSBR’s outreach, suspicion of the move toward greater school choice—and of those who advance it—remains. Some see NSBR as a sort of shadow arm of government, with its many political connections and ties to RSD. Some see it as an effort led by civic “elites” to “sell” the community on choice versus an effort propelled by a groundswell from the masses. Some criticize NSBR for not including enough skeptical voices.

“It’s not really community-led reform. It’s led by NSBR and [State Superintendent] John White and Superintendent Patrick Dobard at the RSD,” says EBR Parish State Representative Ted James, who has fought

efforts to decentralize the EBR school system. He adds, “Pastor Jetson is well respected, but he’s not the only community leader in Baton Rouge.”

Jacqueline Mims helped lead the fight against RSD’s 2014 closure of north Baton Rouge’s iconic Istrouma High School. She is a former EBR Parish school board member and says that while she supports diversity, “if you were really interested in doing something in north Baton Rouge, then Chris Meyer should not be your lead, a white man not from north Baton Rouge.” She adds: “NSBR selects the people they want who will agree with them. Are the people of the community really in control? Or are the people who give NSBR the funding really in control? It does not feel grassroots to me.”

Anna Fogle, a mother of two EBR Parish students and president of the Baton Rouge Association of Gifted and Talented Students, helped lead the Beyond Bricks effort that drew some 600 community members in forums spread across the city in 2015 “to gather community input on how to recharge excellence in our public school system.” (Jetson’s MetroMorphosis organization is a partner.) What surfaced was a desire for strong schools close to home armed with the resources to develop the whole child. “The word ‘choice’ never came up,” Fogle says. “The overriding desire was not, ‘Oh, I want more choices within the system so I can pick one for my kid.’ They just want what’s out there strengthened.” Fogle says

Meyer and NSBR have been supportive of Beyond Bricks, but she questions how much influence the community will have on NSBR's mission. "It's more of a sales pitch."

Says Jetson: "If you come to the engagement with a particular bent, it's important to be transparent with people about it on the front end. To its credit, NSBR has attempted to engage the community and have conversations around its particular take on educating kids. Leaving your agenda at the door is an illusion."

Meyer, for his part, says he won't stop reaching out to skeptics (and has already done so with James, Mims, and Beyond Bricks, as well as the new EBR Parish superintendent). He plans to keep trying to find areas of potential cooperation, such as advocating for universal preschool or devising innovative

ways to make quality school facilities more affordable. Meyer and Fogle are discussing collaboration on a parent guide, which may include community representatives going inside schools to assess aspects that matter most to parents. Ultimately, he hopes the community will judge the new schools created rather than the organization helping to create them.

Looking ahead, NSBR board member Ken Campbell, former Black Alliance for Educational Options president and Louisiana Department of Education charter school office director, sees a need for community empowerment.

"There has to be this piece that looks at community empowerment, and what role community organizations play in this reform effort in Baton Rouge." He mentions groups

such as 100 Black Men and black fraternities and sororities. "I'm not sure what role these community organizations should have, but they need a role."

Democracy Prep's Gieg sees the challenge ahead. "You've got to have the biggest players backing this, and we have it in Baton Rouge. But I worry we're not doing all the things we could to make sure we are really making a citywide effort collectively. In general, is our populace going to back this over the long haul?"

Sustainability remains an open question. However, unlike many reform efforts that have gone before, the roots of engagement in Baton Rouge are evident.

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Community Compact

With the goal of engaging North Baton Rouge residents, education leaders and community stakeholders interested in improving outcomes for children attending public schools in North Baton Rouge, Our Schools...Our Excellence (OSOE) has hosted public events over the course of two and a half years. The purpose of these engagements was to raise awareness of and demand for excellent schools in North Baton Rouge through informed consensus around a collective definition of “excellence.”

A total of approximately 1500 community members participated in the conversations, galvanizing around the theme, “Our Schools...Our Excellence!” This theme underscores a fundamental belief in the ultimate responsibility for the quality of schools being deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

In an effort to advance the understanding and acceptance of this responsibility, OSOE facilitated vigorous dialogue on the general best-practices of “excellent” schools. As a result of this process, the following mandates were identified as essential to initiating authentic, positive change in North Baton Rouge K-12 public schools:

1. ACHIEVE STUDENT SUCCESS

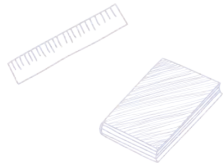
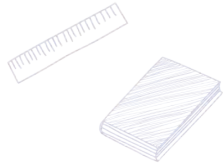
From the “top down,” everyone is focused on student success.

- The responsibility of every adult in the school building is to help each student achieve their maximum potential.
- The goal for all students is the opportunity to find success in college or career and every grade, from kindergarten to senior year, is structured around preparing every student for this goal.
- The culture of every school is a “whatever it takes” approach and pursuit of innovations in the best interest of the students.

2. RECRUIT, REWARD & EMPOWER PROVEN TALENT

Every school has an outstanding principal and every classroom has an outstanding teacher.

- Schools have a clear focus and plan to attract and retain principals and teachers who have demonstrated ability in improving student achievement and development.
- Schools are led by administrators who are accountable for producing excellent results for students.
- Schools support leaders who have the flexibility to identify, hire and reward those who produce the best results for students.



OUR SCHOOLS... OUR EXCELLENCE!

Demanding Excellence in Education

3. ENGAGE PARENTS

There is a commitment to inviting parents from all backgrounds in supporting their child's education.

- Throughout the schools and community there are high expectations for parents and their involvement in their children's education.
- Faculty and staff go to great lengths in providing a variety of opportunities for parents to engage and they take responsibility for ensuring high levels of parental involvement.
- Principals actively solicit parental feedback and input regarding important decisions involving the school through clear, regular and thoughtful communications.

4. SUPPORT STUDENTS

Schools and community partner to provide academic, behavioral and social support to both students and their families.

- There is a shared understanding for the profound connection between academic success and the student's physical, emotional and social well-being.
- Schools and communities act in partnership to identify and acquire needed resources to support both students and their families.
- When basic resources do not exist, schools apply the "whatever it takes" approach to meet the needs of students and their families.

The Our Schools...Our Excellence! Community Compact proposes these four critical mandates and supporting tenets as the beginning of a formal commitment by the participants who helped create them to embrace and advance their actualization. This compact also serves as a basis for seeking the endorsement of its mandates through specific actions by external partners and fellow collaborators. All signatories attest to their individual pledge in both upholding and implementing the mandates of the Our Schools...Our Excellence! Community Compact.

Our Schools...Our Excellence is a BETTER initiative. BETTER is a program of MetroMorphosis. The purpose of OSOE is to build an informed community demand for excellent schools and life experiences for children in North Baton Rouge. To learn more about MetroMorphosis and its programs visit <http://metromorphosis.net>.

