

Sustaining Improvement after State Takeovers: Lessons from New Orleans

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April 2019

Acknowledgments

The generous support of the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation made this report possible. While this report draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone. We could not have written this report without the time and candor of the many New Orleanians who agreed to speak with us. Over many hours, they helped us to understand how local control is and is not shaping education in the city. Robin Lake, Paul Hill, Jeff Henig, and Adam Hawf offered thoughtful feedback, helping to sharpen the report's analysis and findings.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

A Controversial State Takeover Comes to an End 2

OPSB Embraces Its Role as Local Portfolio Manager 4

Challenges Loom for Local Leaders 7

Conclusion: Opportunities for Local Leaders 9

Introduction

An angry and overflowing crowd greeted Orleans Parish School Board Superintendent Henderson Lewis on a cold evening in November 2018 when he announced “major changes for our portfolio of schools.”

More than 100 people showed up at the district’s headquarters, a squat office tower on the West Bank across the Mississippi River from the rest of New Orleans. Many were parents, activists, or workers at schools slated for closure. Some demanded the right to speak against the changes. Some called for the school board to take over charter schools and run them directly. Many repeated a rallying cry: “Take back our schools!”

It was the first round of major charter school authorizing decisions since reunification, the process that placed Lewis and his administration in charge of one of the most far-reaching and contentious governance experiments in American public education. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the vast majority of the city’s public schools came under the control of Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD) and nearly all became charter schools.

In July 2018 the experiment entered a new phase as the last of the schools sponsored by the RSD came under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). It was the culmination of a process that began in May 2016 when, amid growing pressure to restore local governance to New Orleans’ public school system, Governor John Bel Edwards signed Act 91. The law unified the public school system under the control of the democratically elected school board while protecting essential elements of the RSD’s reform strategy.

Education leaders in the city now face a critical test: Can a strategy that took shape under a state takeover—closing low-performing schools and cultivating new charter school management organizations to take their place—continue under a local, democratically elected school board?

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The answer is important, and not only for New Orleans. In recent years, states around the country have sought to improve local school systems by assuming control over local districts, including prominent examples in Lawrence, Massachusetts, as well as in the New Jersey cities of Camden, Jersey City, and Newark. In Tennessee and Nevada, states created turnaround districts that assumed control of persistently low-performing schools. But state takeovers are never permanent. For both practical and political reasons, they must end eventually. After more than a decade of aggressive state action to intervene in local school districts, locally elected boards are ascendant once again in [Newark](#) and [Jersey City](#), with other districts likely to face transitions in coming years.

In New Orleans, state and local leaders took numerous steps to ensure that a return to local control did not spell an end to the conditions enabling the academic improvements that occurred under the RSD. We find, in large part, these preparations had their intended effects. For now, the reforms are insulated from the opposition by unique state legislation designed to protect them, as well as from local leaders who have a stake in sustaining them. To date, RSD supporters’ worst fears haven’t materialized. The return to local control shows no sign of ushering a return to the pre-Katrina status quo when OPSB ran most local schools directly and presided over a scandal-plagued district that languished near the bottom of the state in academic performance, and a valedictorian who couldn’t graduate because of failed state exams became a cultural flashpoint.

But the scene at that November's board meetings hints at political cracks that could emerge in the coming years. Continued progress in New Orleans will hinge upon whether local leaders can assemble support for continued action on low performance and address the emerging challenges facing students, families, and schools. This won't be easy: the board faces an increasingly raucous opposition, and local leaders have yet to aggressively guide the system of schools in new, productive directions.

If OPSB succeeds in building upon the prior era of work rather than simply sustaining it, they will offer new lessons for how to democratically govern a system of autonomous public schools that produces continued academic improvements.

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Learning from New Orleans

We set out to understand how the return to local control has shaped the trajectory of education in the city, with an eye toward implications for other states and localities facing the same transitions. We conducted two rounds of interviews (once in Fall 2016 and again in Fall 2018) with local board members, current and former district staff, charter school leaders and board members, community-based advocates, and state officials. Altogether, we conducted 28 interviews over the course of the project, including 13 with district or state officials, 7 with school or CMO leaders, and 8 with community and civic leaders.

Our interviews focused on understanding how the shift to local control has shaped the role of key government officials and their partners in the nonprofit sector, how local leaders are responding to the demands generated by local control, and what concerns people have about the future of education in New Orleans.

Our interviews provide a snapshot of how local control is playing out and offer some suggestive lessons for other states and localities. However, New Orleans is an exceptional case in a variety of ways, which limits our ability to generalize to other cities, or indeed, speculate with any certainty about how the factors we identify play out over the longer term.

A Controversial State Takeover Comes to an End

Louisiana's RSD took control of most of the local schools in New Orleans in the wake of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. District employees and teachers were terminated and the collective bargaining agreement was allowed to expire. Funders, educational nonprofits, and idealistic young people flocked to the city to take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild the city and fundamentally reimagine the school system.

That reimagining resulted in charter operators running most of the city's schools and the emergence of a thriving nonprofit sector to support them. The RSD pioneered new supports for families and schools alike—including a unified system for school enrollment (known as OneApp), a centralized system to

adjudicate expulsions, and a novel funding scheme designed to allocate more resources to schools based on student needs. Nonprofits like New Schools for New Orleans, Teach for America, and TNTP helped bring new talent into the city’s education system. Homegrown charter school operators emerged to run most schools. Some schools [consolidated into networks](#) that supported multiple campuses. Systemic transformation, coupled with an infusion of money and talent, [helped propel New Orleans’ public schools](#) to 42nd in a performance ranking of the state’s 68 school districts from 67th. Researchers at Tulane University found the district’s strategy of routinely closing the city’s lowest-performing schools and recruiting with new operators to replace them was a [key driver of that improvement](#).

But the state takeover came at a cost. Bitter debates unfolded over the firing of black educators, the loss of local representation, and the closure of schools. The history of racial tension amplified concerns over state intervention as a majority black city confronted mostly white state policymakers—as well as growing ranks of educators from out of state.¹ Many of the city’s public schools have active local alumni bases and stand as points of pride for local residents, which inflamed tensions around efforts to transform long-standing community institutions. Despite these tensions, general perceptions of the changes in New Orleans remain positive. Since 2015 annual surveys by the Cowen Institute consistently show 60 percent of residents agree charter schools [have improved public education](#).

Against this backdrop, the Louisiana legislature passed Act 91 in 2016. The legislation required all schools overseen by the RSD to come under OPSB oversight by 2018, thereby phasing out the role of the state in the school system. The legislation codified key elements of the reforms launched by the RSD, including autonomy for school operators, school choice, and authorizing and accountability standards. Its provisions:

- Established OPSB as the overseeing entity for [all public schools in New Orleans](#) (except seven charter schools authorized by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and an arts academy created by the Legislature).
- Empowered the superintendent with authority to make recommendations around closure, renewal, and approval of charter schools, and required a supermajority vote by the school board to overrule the superintendent’s recommendations.
- Required all schools to participate in OneApp.
- Required OPSB to maintain a per-pupil resource allocation system to fund schools based on student characteristics.
- Preserved autonomy for operators around curriculum, programming, human resources, and budgeting.

Superintendent Lewis [described the plan](#) as a “rare and unique opportunity to build something that is the first of its kind in the nation. We are building a unified district made up of nearly all charter schools.” [In a *Wall Street Journal* guest column](#), Louisiana State Superintendent John White argued that under unification, charter school and other nonprofit entrepreneurs would be charged with confronting the remaining challenges facing the city, while a “lean” central office would focus on protecting students’ rights and holding schools accountable. “This reconceiving of power in education, now codified in Louisiana law, offers hope to the nation that the urban school district’s central office, long an immovable instrument of politics, can be reimagined for the sake of those children who most need a good education,” he wrote.

1. Analogous issues of race and representation have arisen in other cities where state officials took over local schools, or where mayors took over governance from elected school boards. See Domingo Morel, [Takeover: Race, Education and American Democracy](#) (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

While most charter operators backed the plan, many of our 2016 interviewees openly worried about how the shift would affect schools and families. Longtime observers of OPSB, including many who invested in the reforms initiated by the RSD, wondered whether the historically dysfunctional board and central office would have the capacity to take over the enrollment and portfolio management systems necessary for reunification. Others feared the elected board might not be able to resist the urge to encroach on schools' autonomy or soften its stance on accountability. And some officials worried OPSB would not take as strong a stance on equity concerns. Many schools authorized or run by the district had not previously participated in the shared enrollment system, and granted preferences to students based on test scores or where they lived—mechanisms that tended to favor students from more affluent families.

Others criticized the plan for the opposite reason, arguing it tied the hands of the local board so much that it was left with no real power to address community concerns. As activist Ashana Bigard [put it](#), “We’re getting a school board which has been reduced to a monitoring service, run by charter school advocates.”

Meanwhile, some national observers asserted the return to OPSB control undermined a core purpose of the state takeover, which was to liberate schools from the meddling of local officials. Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform [took to local media](#) to herald the “unraveling” of post-Katrina reform. “This is the same structure, by the way, which doomed New Orleans students to violent and chronically failing schools before Katrina,” she argued in *The Advocate*.

OPSB Embraces Its Role as Local Portfolio Manager

While it is too early to tell how unification will play out over the longer term, we found considerable evidence that OPSB has embraced the strategies launched under the RSD, including continued action on low-performing schools and maintenance of the enrollment and funding systems on which all schools depend.

In our interviews as well as in public forums, the district’s current leaders described their new roles as authorizers who regulate a system of autonomous schools, rather than as operators of a traditional district. Superintendent Lewis, who is appointed by the board and controls all authorizing decisions under the new governance structure, has continued to close low-performing schools and worked to replace their operators with higher-performing ones.

While not all of our interviewees shared the same opinion about the limits of board authority or the desirability of board action on particular issues, OPSB is proactively working with charter school leaders to identify the best course of action in response to emerging issues and has resisted efforts to interfere in school operations. For example, in response to community concerns that students were being picked up unreasonably early in transit to school, OPSB [worked with operators and the Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Council to devise new rules](#) that prohibited schools from picking students up from their homes prior to 6:05 a.m. As a charter management organization (CMO) leader told us, “[The] process is very iterative, it’s lining up support for different positions ... and building shared understanding of the issues.”

OPSB’s commitment to building buy-in among charter school operators has created additional demands on charter governing boards and charter school leaders, who are increasingly asked to review policies, convene with district staff, and negotiate among each other on key decisions. The leader of one CMO confessed: “It’s meetings. It’s phone calls. It’s reading documents, responding to proposed policies.” While this has required building new political capacities and investments of time and energy, it has enabled operators to retain influence over key board decisions that affect them.

Our 2016 interviews with state and local leaders suggested a key concern for unification was whether OPSB maintained a commitment to addressing inequities in the system. As the RSD transitioned from an operator of schools to a regulator of schools, its leaders made a point of emphasizing their role in creating a level playing field for students, families, and schools. When inequities became apparent, they took the lead in designing systems meant to address them. For example, they developed OneApp after complaints arose that families struggled to navigate application and enrollment processes across multiple schools in the city—a burden that fell especially heavily on low-income parents.

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We find little evidence that OPSB has retreated from its predecessors' commitment to equity and problem-solving. It has actively intervened when schools have not followed systemwide policies around transportation and special education that affect student access and success. The local board has also made additional investments in supporting families with children enrolled in schools slated for closure to find new schools by securing support from EdNavigator, a [nonprofit organization that helps families navigate the school choice process and advocate for their children](#). This doesn't merely soften one of the roughest edges of New Orleans' close-and-replace strategy. It is vital to the strategy's success because it increases the chances that students displaced by a closure will wind up in a better-performing school than the one they attended previously. As a leader of a local nonprofit told us, "You have to have [EdNavigator], or [closure] is not a responsible thing to do to families. You can't be like, 'We are closing the school, good luck.' You can't have our theory of change and not have EdNavigator."

The ethos that drove reform under the RSD did not transmit to OPSB by accident. Both policy and people have helped the transition to local control unfold as seamlessly as it has.

Codifying the Reform Strategy in Law

The state law that consolidated the city's school system under the local board is crafted to make the reform strategy resistant to the demands of activists, citizens, and interest groups who might oppose efforts by the superintendent to maintain the course charted under the RSD. This includes explicit legislative language meant to preserve systems around authorization and closure, autonomy for school operators, and choice for students and families.

Act 91 places crucial decision-making authority over charter school closures, contract renewals, and new school approvals in the superintendent's hands. It allows the school board to override his decisions only with a two-thirds vote. While such a supermajority would be difficult to achieve, especially since open meetings laws limit board members' ability to coordinate actions outside public meetings, it is not impossible.

But the law is also designed to insulate the superintendent from the political concerns of the elected school board. Board action is not always required on Lewis' recommendations and as a result, school board meetings do not always allow public comment. This deprives potential opponents of a public place to raise their concerns and reduces the chances the board will bow to public pressure and override decisions, such as the school closures announced in November 2018, or the effort to reconstitute McDonogh 35—the last remaining district-operated high school in the city—as a charter school. These constraints have fueled the ire of a small but persistent group of critics who have protested the district taking actions during school board meetings, and highlighted the lack of opportunity to voice their concerns.

The law preserves the freedoms and funding guarantees that existed for charter schools before local control. It protects against board actions that affect a wide range of areas, including school programming, instruction, curriculum, school calendars and schedules, staffing and human resource practices, collective bargaining, and budgeting. And it requires the board to adopt a per-pupil funding system that allocates funds to charter schools in the district based on the characteristics of the students each school enrolls. In 2016, working in conjunction with operators, the board adopted the Differentiated Funding Formula that provides additional resources to schools that enroll disadvantaged students, including students with special needs, while decreasing the additional funds previously attached to gifted students.

Finally, while OPSB gained operational control over EnrollNOLA, the citywide enrollment system—which many supporters believe is key to facilitating equal access to choice—the law insulated that system from changes that would put an end to family choice in the city. First, it requires all operators in the city to participate in OneApp. Prior to unification, some OPSB schools maintained separate application processes. Second, while the law enables OPSB to make changes to the enrollment system to incorporate neighborhood-based preferences in student assignment, it limits the scope of such preferences to 50 percent of seats in elementary and middle schools.

The political momentum behind the return to local control made these features of the law possible. Senior leaders at OPSB, the RSD, the Louisiana Department of Education, and the nonprofit sector demonstrated sincere good will and a willingness to help ensure a successful unification process. Most charter school leaders and board members supported the shift to local control and invested to make it succeed, as evidenced by the amount of time they reported on working with OPSB to develop the locally led system. As one journalist described the process, “[There’s] peace between the [RSD and OPSB] and goodwill among the men and women planning the end of state takeover.”

Building OPSB’s Capacity

While Act 91 required OPSB to take certain actions, thereby protecting many of the reforms instituted under the RSD, it provided no guarantees that OPSB would fulfill those duties. Indeed, as discussed above, many worried the legislation would not be enough to address the dysfunctions evident in OPSB in previous years. We find considerable evidence that OPSB worked to develop the capacity necessary to sustain the reforms launched in the RSD.

OPSB worked to develop the capacity necessary to sustain the reforms launched in the RSD.

The district invested deeply in assembling a staff of top administrators that understood the portfolio strategy and was vested in sustaining it under a unified system. It reorganized the central office to better fit its work overseeing a decentralized system of schools and shed millions of dollars from the district’s budget. OPSB also worked to codify particular practices in preparation for its work as a system leader, including the creation of a new accountability system, investments in school monitoring, and a pipeline for new school operators.

Reunification resulted in transfers of expertise and staff between the RSD and OPSB. Staff that oversaw OneApp and school facilities management became employees of OPSB, keeping essential expertise in the system. The RSD also facilitated joint meetings between the two organizations’ portfolio management teams.

While OPSB absorbed staff that transitioned from RSD during the unification process, the unified district also inherited Superintendent Lewis, who was hired to oversee OPSB in 2015. An educator from neighboring St. Bernard Parish, he bought into the reform vision, becoming not only a key decision-maker under the structure created by Act 91, but a primary public communicator of the district’s improvement strategy. He has appeared at community forums to defend controversial closure decisions, arguing low-

performing schools must be closed to make way for schools that better meet families' needs. As he said at a November 2018 board meeting, "I am coming into this situation with the difficult task of both unifying and uplifting the district, because every child deserves a great school. That's why tonight I am going to recommend several school closures. These closures are tough on families and communities, but they go a long way to deliver on my goal of reducing failing schools. Consistent failure to deliver academic outcomes will not be tolerated here in the district."

Challenges Loom for Local Leaders

Any reform strategy, no matter how robust or insulated from opponents, can falter in the face of opposition. Critics of New Orleans' reforms faced greater difficulty applying pressure to statewide entities like the RSD, the legislature, or the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education—which all answer to a range of other constituents beyond Orleans Parish—than to their local school board.

Reunification took some political pressure off the system: the end of the state takeover undermined one of the key critiques of the post-Katrina system. But New Orleans faces challenges that could spell political trouble in the future. While Act 91 limits the board's power in a variety of ways, it does not cover all the possible domains of board intervention or guarantee that school system leaders will act in good faith.

The end of the state takeover undermined one of the key critiques of the post-Katrina system. But New Orleans faces challenges that could spell political trouble in the future.

One issue that has become front and center over the last year is the quality, qualifications, and training of charter school board members. As a charter board member told us, the city now needs not only seven qualified school board members, but also qualified candidates to fill 38 [independent charter school boards](#). That raises the question: Does the city have the infrastructure in place for grooming, recruiting, training, holding accountable, and building a pipeline to recruit those people? Soon after unification became official, OPSB created a charter board working group to determine what qualifications and training of people who serve on charter boards should have. "We know that the adults serving on charter boards feel like they were not equipped with the necessary knowledge and capacity to serve as their best selves," one district official said.

How this specific debate plays out could provide clues as to whether the board can navigate community demands for solutions in a system designed to protect schools from such pressures.

If OPSB acts to require charter boards to undergo certain training or be composed of members with certain professional backgrounds, as some observers suspect, it will set a precedent for future actions on different issues. As one school leader told us, "People have demands... All of those demands ... will have some legitimacy ... but they will make the job of being a teacher, being a leader, harder unintentionally and sometimes imperceptibly. [But] multiply it by one thousand" and it becomes a problem.

Like the RSD, OPSB also faces some criticism over its handling of school closures. While there is good evidence the board and Superintendent Lewis have embraced their roles as portfolio managers, the spectacle that unfolded at the board's first meeting in November 2018 around school closure and authorization signal tensions that could grow into a political vulnerability. As one state official told us, the portfolio review could "give fuel to local political actors, who see getting on the school board as a better chance to make noise... the more the board is elevated, the more it becomes a political target and a political opportunity for opponents of change and improvement."

At that board meeting, protestors called on the board to directly operate the schools slated for closure, chanting, “Take back our schools.” Not only do such concerns put pressure on board members, they also help to bolster the views of longtime critics. State Representative Joseph Bouie Jr.—the only member of the New Orleans legislative delegation to oppose Act 91— [has repeatedly called on the board to manage low-performing schools](#) directly and “not [to] charter or close another school.” Bouie introduced legislation in 2015 that would return RSD-authorized schools to local control, a process [some credit](#) with helping bring about Act 91.

While some of the loudest criticisms of authorizing decisions emanate from critics whose opposition predates unification, district officials acknowledged valid concerns about how closing a school, or bringing it under the management of a new charter school operator, disrupts students who attend or teachers who work there. As one said, “There’s so many different costs to a closure that I think have to be better acknowledged and quantified and supported if we want to continue to have this sort of high-stakes accountability in the system, which I’m not arguing against. I just think we need to consider the impact more than we do now.”

In the school year before reunification, all but 4 schools operated as charter schools, including 37 authorized by OPSB. Two of those direct-run schools became charters going into the 2018–2019 school year. Any effort to convert New Orleans’ public schools back to district-run entities would rely upon slow and incremental efforts to take over the operations of existing schools that underperform academically, flounder financially, or otherwise succumb to mismanagement.

OPSB has the authority to take such actions, though it faces serious difficulty doing so regularly, given the resources required to pull it off. Thus far, the district has opted to directly run schools only in exceptional cases, and only on a temporary basis. One test case, Cypress Academy, came before unification was complete. Three days before summer break, [parents learned the small upstart school](#) that served a high proportion of students with disabilities would close because of financial difficulties. Its money problems may have been exacerbated by [an unexpected spike in the number of students requiring special education services](#), which diluted the pool of funding designed to help them. The news triggered outcry after parents realized the district’s normal application window for other schools had closed, and many spots in schools likely to accommodate their children’s needs were already taken. OPSB stepped into the breach, pledging to run the school itself for two years. However, midway through the school year, the district decided instead to merge the small elementary school with another single-site provider, Foundation Prep, in the following year, in part because the school’s financial position had become unsustainable.

In the other instance since unification, OPSB took over Edgar P. Harney Spirit of Excellence Academy in the middle of the 2018–2019 school year after severe problems came to light and the school began to unravel. Investigators found the school failed to provide special education services required under federal law. Auditors flagged spending practices that ran afoul of state ethics requirements, and officials uncovered other problems so serious they were referred to local prosecutors. The school’s board fired the principal, and some board members resigned, placing the school further out of compliance and raising questions about whether it could continue to function if the district did not assume control. OPSB had already decided not to renew its charter, meaning Harney would close at the end of the school year, anyway. According to [one media report](#), Superintendent Lewis emphasized the exceptional nature of the case, saying: “I’ve been an educator for over 20 years, and I’ve never seen anything like this.”

These early test cases show that OPSB sees real barriers to directly running schools itself for long periods of time. But they also raise questions about under what circumstances the district will, or will not, assume direct control of a school it oversees, and how it evaluates those decisions. The district

could argue it had no choice but to run these two schools directly to avoid creating chaos for the schools' students and their families. But critics could also argue it set a precedent that OPSB was willing to assume direct control of charter schools under its purview.

These emergent issues suggest that, just like other school boards around the country, OPSB confronts real pressure to take action. As is always the case, the desirability of action is rarely unambiguous and reasonable people can disagree about when policymaking bodies should do something and when they should stand down. So far, OPSB has acted with deliberation and a commitment to the principles of the previous era's work. But that provides no guarantees that future boards or superintendents won't use their power to move the system in new directions.

Conclusion: Opportunities for Local Leaders

For longtime critics of the New Orleans reform strategy, the return to local control did not address their concerns, but it did provide new opportunities to exert pressure on the system of schools. But leaders, for the most part, appear to be holding steady on the previous work. Local control neither overturned the reforms initiated under the RSD, nor quelled all the criticisms.

The New Orleans' unification story points to both the advantages and liabilities of a locally led system. The successes under OPSB's leadership—including a new funding formula and performance framework, a re-missioned central office, a renewed commitment to working with charter school leaders, and continued action on low-performing schools—point to what's possible when local leaders come together under a common reform vision. But local control also amplifies the political demands school system leaders face. As a result, the success of local control in New Orleans will hinge upon whether leaders can continue to build support for their vision of school system improvement.

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That vision is all the more important now because, after more than a decade of steady gains, improvement in New Orleans' test scores and graduation rates seems to have leveled off. As one local stakeholder told us, "There is real worry that the level of innovation and improvement have tailed off... How to tackle the plateau, when it's clear OPSB didn't cause it, is unclear. If it continues, what do we do?" The stagnation in gains for students could amplify the political pressures the board is facing. This academic plateau, which predates the return to local control, has laid bare a deeper set of systemic challenges, including disconnects between early childhood, K-12, and higher education and a lack of support—both inside and outside of school—for students and families struggling with mental health issues, poverty, and the criminal justice system.

Growing attention to these issues arrives at a moment when many observers are worried the enthusiasm and momentum that drew funders and young people to the city has dissipated.

OPSB could be a critical voice on the challenges facing schools—and the children and families they serve—helping to convene actors to solve emerging problems. But to date, their voice on these issues has been insufficient to drive the changes many believe the system needs. As one government official told us, "Schools have to work together to accomplish things that necessitate collaboration and that have a systemwide implication. And on that, I think, we have to see OPSB's voice really emerge." Or as a CMO leader put it, "We have a lot of autonomy, but as a result don't have any pressure to do certain things... Sometimes I wish OPSB would be the conveners around strategies that operators can operationalize to have more success."

How OPSB meets new challenges, even as it faces diminished access to talent and outside resources and growing pressure to move in a new direction, will shape whether the locally led system can build upon the gains achieved during the state takeover. Managing both new and long-standing critics of the system will be essential to New Orleans' future success. Closures, in particular, are a community flashpoint that must be proactively managed. As one official put it:

“The ramifications of a [closure] decision are far-reaching and the preparation you have to do to announce such a decision is extensive and I don’t think [OPSB] understand[s] the front-end work that’s needed to take these actions... The consequence of this is that you then come to a board meeting with 100 people who are [upset] ... and a board who then has to sit through a three-hour meeting with people yelling at them, [it] ultimately affects how they’ll manage their superintendent.”

While politics is always filled with ambiguity, one thing seems clear: continued improvement in New Orleans will not simply hinge upon whether OPSB successfully puts into place the elements of the system that existed under the RSD. It must find effective ways to coordinate a scattered, yet urgent, effort to identify unmet needs and serve as the key influencer on systems affecting schools and the children and families they serve. As Robin Lake [wrote](#) on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, progress in New Orleans was driven by a “coordinated and focused commitment among New Orleans civic leaders to continually search for a better way and to solve problems as they arise.” While unification has effectively sustained the regime that guided New Orleans under the state takeover, it will fail if its goal is to simply hold steady the work of the previous 10 years.

How OPSB meets new challenges will shape whether the locally led system can build upon the gains achieved during the state takeover.

The wholesale changes that occurred in New Orleans likely could not have happened without state intervention. For other localities worried about sustaining systemic transformations after takeovers end, New Orleans offers key lessons in how proactive policymaking can create a bulwark that safeguards school autonomy and other key features of the reforms and underscores the value of deliberate transfers of knowledge and talent.

But it also reveals that these features offer incomplete solutions to the challenges of democratic governance in public education. Laws can change, new superintendents must be appointed to lead, and school board members face reelection. How local leaders manage the political pressures that emerge is likely to shape the future of education in New Orleans—for better or for worse.