On April 20, the Louisiana Senate unanimously adopted Senate Bill 432 (SB 432) and sent it to the Louisiana House, where it currently sits. The bill would unify New Orleans charter schools under a single authorizer, the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), which is comprised of elected members. In doing so, many elements of the New Orleans school system, a combination of charter and public schools developed over the last decade, would be codified in one law.

SB 432 preserves charter schools’ autonomy, citywide family choice, school accountability, and a district-wide focus on common enrollment and expulsion systems. This is good to see, as the system has not always contained such mechanisms to help ensure student success. As recently as 2003, the New Orleans school system had hit rock bottom and was in need of complete overhaul.

Background

In May 2003, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco signed into law Act 9, which created the Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD was created to take over and transform any Louisiana schools that had not met minimum academic standards for four consecutive years. By spring 2005, the RSD had taken over five New Orleans schools.

Then Hurricane Katrina hit in fall 2005, weakening or wiping out almost all public school
buildings in New Orleans. The Louisiana Legislature acted boldly, passing Act 35 to turn 102 of 124 public schools in New Orleans over to the RSD. The OPSB retained a handful of schools, but by and large, the RSD was responsible for managing public education in New Orleans.

What happened over the next decade was unimaginable upon the creation of the RSD in 2003. Inviting charter operators into the state and working with the decreased population of New Orleans post-Katrina, the RSD helped New Orleans’ public schools vastly improve. By 2014, across the district, student math and reading average scores went up by 28 and 26 points, respectively; the district moved from 68 percent of its schools receiving an “F” from the state department of education to only 10 percent; and the Orleans Parish district improved from being the second-worst district in the state to the middle of the pack.

A major reason for such vast improvement has been the different style of governance since the RSD was created. Rather than every school being governed by an elected school board, most schools are charters authorized by either the OPSB or the RSD. These charter schools have been given autonomy to make decisions on everything from curriculum to collective bargaining and hiring and firing. Throughout New Orleans, there are 74 charter schools—52 authorized by the RSD and 18 authorized by the OPSB.

Along with the introduction of charter schools, a hodgepodge of other education reforms has helped improve the New Orleans school system. Even though the RSD is state appointed and the OPSB is an elected body, the two have figured out how to cooperate together and work toward the common goal of providing quality education. Together, they developed a common enrollment and expulsion system, a cooperative program to fix education buildings throughout the city, and a weighted student funding formula. Such reforms have provided unity where there might have otherwise been a turf war over who controls education.

### Understanding the Proposal

A lot of provisions are packed into this bill. The most important points include:

- **SB 432** introduces comprehensive legislation that aims to codify the many successes from the last decade by placing responsibility for management and authorization of charter schools in one place—with the elected school board OPSB.
- If passed, the OPSB will become the central office authorizer of all charter schools in New Orleans.
- The RSD would hand the 52 schools it currently oversees over to the OPSB.

### Positive Aspects of the Proposal

SB 432’s main goal of giving citizens local control over schools through elected officials is undoubtedly good. The three best aspects of the proposal are:

- **SB 432** would return schools that are now successful to local control. Instead of holding on in a state of perpetual reform, RSD reformers are rightly trying to give back control of successful schools to the citizens whose children attend them.
- Under **SB 432**, charter schools would maintain autonomy over hiring, firing, collective bargaining, curriculum, pedagogy, and other key areas.
- Charters would retain local education agency status, meaning that they control their own funds and are responsible for how they implement state standards of education. This protects the autonomy of charters from local school-board overreach.
Potential Pitfalls

While the goal is laudable, it is unclear whether the right mechanisms will be put in place to reach it. Success of SB 432 depends largely on its implementation after passage. Here are three potential pitfalls in the way of success:

- Local school-board governance may be in conflict with charter school management. A local school board also has an interest in running and keeping open public schools it manages directly. This could result in less autonomy for charter schools and the politicization of funding decisions, especially during election season.

- Transitions are risky. Moreover, the less-than-two-year timeline (the OPSB is set to take over schools on June 1, 2018) is rushed for the magnitude of the task. The OPSB will be taking on more than three times the work it now does and has been accustomed to since 2005. Whether it can acclimate itself to that task in less than two years is yet to be seen.

- The loss of legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the public if the transition is delayed or fails would be a catastrophic threat to the great work of the last decade by both the RSD and OPSB.

Conclusion

The RSD and OPSB have been a model of cooperation since Hurricane Katrina, and SB 432 is another example of how both organizations, as well as the Louisiana Legislature, have kept their eyes on the prize of offering high-quality education to New Orleans families. But the bill’s passage is only the beginning of a long and tenuous journey. More important than the passage of the bill is the implementation of its provisions. SB 432 is the right step forward so long as its provisions are managed correctly.

Even if the transition goes poorly or the state finds itself in a position where it has to establish another RSD in the future, this attempt will not be regretted. The story of New Orleans public education for the last 10 years has been one of bold risk taking for the good of children. SB 432 is right in line with that. There are potential pitfalls, but fear of failure should not get in the way of trying to establish the best-case scenario of governing high-quality public schools.

About the Author

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