
Did a Hurricane Trigger Educational Improvement?



Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on New Orleans, a new [report](#) takes stock of how post-storm reforms impacted the city's schools.

Authored by Tulane professor and NEPC Fellow [Doug Harris](#), along with [Jamie Carroll](#), associate director of research for the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, the report distills 20 years of research on the city's schools.

In the wake of the storm, Harris and Carroll remind their readers, the state took over nearly all the city's public schools, converting them to charters. All educators were fired, the union contract was not renewed, and attendance zones were eliminated so families could, in theory, choose any school in the city. Within 13 years, local control had resumed, but all schools remained charters.

The report's most potentially controversial conclusion is not a new claim: The reorganization led to substantial improvements in student outcomes, including test scores that rose by 11 to 16 percentile points compared with similar students and districts; graduation rates that increased by three to nine percentage points; and college graduation rates that grew by three to five percentage points. Harris and Carroll note that [critics](#) have suggested that, because so many residents left New Orleans permanently or for long periods after the storm, the post-Katrina student population was too different to allow for the conclusion that reforms caused these improvements. (The same critics pointed to greatly increased funding

and resources, as noted below.)

Harris and Carroll, in the new report, acknowledge the demographic changes. But they assert, “we have tested these alternative explanations and find that the school reforms caused the vast majority of the improved outcomes.”

(More extensive discussions of these critiques are available [here](#) and [here](#).)

In this most recent report, Harris and Carroll do state that a post-reform funding increase of 13 percent “likely contributed to student gains.” They point out that the new funds were used mainly to cover an increase in administrative spending, including higher administrator salaries (while teacher salaries declined) but also more counselors and aides.

Although it highlights positive outcomes, the report does not shy away from less positive or mixed results:

- By some measures, Black students and students from low-income families experienced more educational opportunities. But by other measures, they did not. And opportunity gaps remained between Black and White students and students from lower- and higher-income families.
- Transportation costs doubled as students traveled farther to get to school, sometimes because they preferred charters far from home and other times because they were not admitted to schools closer to home. These expenses disproportionately burdened lower-income families without reliable cars.
- Teacher turnover increased, and experience and education levels decreased. Student surveys suggest that teacher quality is worse than in similar urban districts, especially when it comes to measures of caring and classroom management. Although not mentioned in this particular report, the Education Research Alliance’s prior data indicates that the racial demographics of the teaching force [shifted](#) dramatically after the storm. Pre-Katrina, the city’s teaching force was 71 percent Black. By 2014, that share had declined to less than 50 percent. NEPC Fellow [Kristen Buras](#) has written extensively about this loss, and she just [released a book](#) focused on the closure of one NOLA high school.
- Access to early education and the arts declined.
- Exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions) increased in the early years of the reorganization. However, Harris and Carroll state that they did not find evidence that this led to more incarceration: “Rather, we find some evidence that the reforms reduced conviction rates among New Orleans youth, compared with similar students across Louisiana.”
- Students who opted to attend private schools under a statewide voucher program started in 2008 did not experience the positive educational outcomes Harris and Carroll associate with the city’s charter schools.

Most importantly, Harris and Carroll stress that the NOLA results may not be applicable to other cities, given that pre-storm educational outcomes were particularly poor—leaving

more room for improvement—and given the additional funding and relative lack of teacher shortages during the period of the reorganization.

Moreover, even with the increases, NOLA test scores and graduation rates still [stubbornly trail](#) statewide averages.

Looking to the future, Harris and Carroll remain cautiously optimistic about the city's schools.

“To reach a higher bar, local leaders will have to address remaining distrust among key stakeholders and disagreement about the roles of the district and other key actors,” they write. “While progress has been made, it is crucial to carefully assess both the successes and challenges in order to continue advancing educational opportunities for all students in the city.”

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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