New Orleans school reform could serve as model for KCPS

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NEW ORLEANS, La. - A nearly decade-long reform of the New Orleans public school system, which has put a greater percentage of students in educator-controlled schools than any other district in the nation and correlated with significant improvement in both student and school performance, while also drawing the ire of teachers unions and some parents, could become a model for state intervention into the troubled Kansas City Public School system.

A plan for taking over KCPS should the state of Missouri choose to intervene in the unaccredited school district, developed by education think-tank CEE-Trust, borrows heavily from New Orleans' experience in decentralizing school control; handing over the keys to schools to non-profit charter operators and educators given both freedom to run schools as they choose and accountability for meeting state-mandated performance standards

While the CEE-Trust plan expands significantly on New Orleans' post-Katrina experience in educational reform, CEE-Trust CEO Ethan Gray said if any American city provides a blueprint for how implementation of their plan might look in the future, it's the Big Easy.

"What we had was badly broken"

As the executive director of Tulane University's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, John Ayers devotes most of his time and energy to tracking the progress of New Orleans schools and the children who have slowly returned to them in the years after Hurricane Katrina scattered this city's population, setting in motion a full-scale reform of the city's schools.

"A lot of the ugliest things in urban education were going on in the New Orleans school system," Ayers said in an early February interview in his spacious Poydras Street office. "There were 125 schools in New Orleans and there were 65,000 students, but the system was badly broken. It had a lot of corruption, bad financial situation; in fact the FBI had an office in the central office of New Orleans schools."

Patrick Dobard, the superintendent of Louisiana's state-run Recovery School District for failing schools, agreed with that assessment.

"Right before the storm it was just a horrific education experience in New Orleans," he told 41 Action News in an interview last week. "The average student was in a chronically under-performing school."

Indeed, Ayers cites Cowen Institute statistics that before the storm hit in 2005, 75% of New Orleans school students attended failing schools. Now, that number is just seventeen percent. Many students never returned to the city or the public schools, which now count just above 43,000 students, almost exclusively African-American, and the vast majority eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Last year, New Orleans was cited as the most-improved school district in the state of Louisiana.

“I can tell you this particular school works for our students and families.”

After the storm, with students scattered and the district both broke and badly broken, the state-run recovery school district, or RSD, swooped in and took control of nearly all of New Orleans’ schools, leaving only a handful under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board.

The RSD, now with a portfolio of schools well beyond its ability to manage alone, began re-launching schools as charter schools; some run by the RSD itself, others by operators that grew organically in New Orleans’ neighborhoods and school communities or arrived with national reputations, like KIPP, which also runs a school in Kansas City and will have 13 percent of the students in New Orleans in one of its schools next year.

At the heart of New Orleans’ reform is choice. Parents can choose to send their children to any school in the district, not just their neighborhood schools. Some magnet-style schools require testing for admission, but most use a matching system developed by MIT researchers to help students, parents and schools find the best fits regardless of geography.

That choice matters because each school is different. Principals, directors of charter networks or front line educators themselves are in charge; they set budgets, write curricula, hire and fire teachers and set priorities. Some might focus on arts, others engineering or languages. Critics have charged too much focus solely on achieving the high test scores needed to keep their charters, instilling military-style discipline and rigorous college prep at the cost of a more diversified experience.

Those scores matter. With freedom for educators comes accountability. Many teachers are on at-will contracts and the RSD maintains the right to revoke charters and shut down schools that don’t perform.

“If you're not successful, then something has to change,” one school leader explained, “and oftentimes that starts with leadership.”

Among the homegrown charter operators to expand and succeed in post-Katrina New Orleans is Firstline Schools, founded by Jay Altman. Firstline provided 41 Action News inside two of its most successful schools, Dibert Community School and Arthur Ashe, both K-8 schools in the Mid City neighborhood. Both are rated as “B” schools in the state’s ranking system and outperform many of their peers.

At Dibert, we met Mizzou graduate and Teach for America alum Andrew Stuart. Stuart was a founding teacher at Dibert when the school launched as a Firstline school three and a half years ago. In the intervening years, he has risen to become a department chair and author of the 8th grade English and language arts curriculum.

Stuart was circumspect about whether New Orleans “portfolio” model for schools could work for students elsewhere in the country, but defended strongly how it works for his.

“The model is the reason this particular school exists,” Stuart said. “And I can tell you this particular school works for our students and families.”

Ayers took a longer view.

“We took a system that was terrible, and we've gotten it to mediocre, ok? And, so, I don't want to oversell what we've done. We're in the middle in [Louisiana.] But that’s a miracle given how far we had to travel,” Ayers said.

“It is not an experimentation. We actually take great offense at that”

New Orleans’ model has its fair share of critics, both inside the city and across the country.

First among those critics are unionized teachers. After Katrina, the state fired thousands of union teachers – part of the city’s core African American middle class. While some have gotten teaching jobs back, most have not.

They continue to argue that New Orleans’ students are poorly served by teachers who are younger and less experienced than their peers across the state and often ill-equipped to deal with poor and emotionally damaged children like those who returned to schools following the storm.

“We ended up with a lot of young teachers and a good percentage of them, we think, crashed and burned because it’s very hard to teach in inner city schools,” Ayers said.

Many parents were also unconvinced that giving up their neighborhood school and bussing their children back and forth across the crescent city was the best choice. Ayers and other education officials describe a significant amount of parental skepticism that had to be overcome for the new system to get off the ground.

The new system favors students whose parents are heavily involved in selecting the right school, critics argue. Until a district-wide expulsion policy was outlined this year, it also faced accusations that schools pushed out low-performing students to keep the all-important test scores high. Special needs, ESL and other groups, critics argued, were poorly served by a system that needs numbers and growth to sustain itself at all times.

Even some education policy experts in favor of New Orleans’ approach also worry it has created too many cookie-cutter schools. The success of high-discipline programs like KIPP has spawned imitators who some believe have sacrificed the originality and creativity that are New Orleans’ international hallmark in favor of chasing standardized test scores.

But perhaps the most persistent criticism of the New Orleans model is that it is fundamentally unstable and unproven, an experiment with school children as its subjects. Schools open and close, teachers come and go, the system churns on and students suffer.

That notion drew a sharp response from the superintendent of the Recover School District when I asked him about it last week.

to pay for universal pre-kindergarten for Kansas City students.

Perhaps in an effort (so far unsuccessful) to curry support with union teachers, the CEE-Trust plan also explicitly states that teachers would still be allowed to organize, albeit at the school or network level, not district-wide.

The CEE-Trust plan also goes to great length not to label all the resulting schools and networks as charter schools. The word has taken on something of a negative connotation in some corners of the educational establishment in Kansas City where charter schools have performed little better than their traditional school peers.

At its core, The CEE-Trust plan, however, follows the most important elements in place in New Orleans: Choice for parents, freedom and accountability for educators. Even the philanthropic arm, meant to corral grants and help recruit school operators of New Schools for New Orleans, is replicated in the Kansas City plan.

“The thing I love most about the plan before Kansas City right now is it hands power back to educators,” Kingsland said.

“No reason it can't be done, but you want to do it thoughtfully.”

No hurricane is likely to strike Kansas City this year or the next. There will be no cataclysmic event to “clear the table” as happened in New Orleans. Over the course of a three-day visit, we asked the question again and again of our hosts and interviewees: could this kind of choice model be replicated elsewhere? Could it work in Kansas City?

“You need to be obsessive about talent,” Kingsland said. “You need to make sure the best people in Kansas City are becoming teachers.”

“I actually think it can be duplicated,” Dobard said. “We love our uniqueness in New Orleans, but at the end of the day the world is a very small place. And I think we're much more alike, whether its individuals in Kansas City, than we are different,”

“No reason it can't be done,” Altman said. “But you want to do it thoughtfully.”

CEE-Trust CEO Ethan Gray defends his plan as based on the best educational research, and input from focus groups of stakeholders in Kansas City. There’s thought. Expected support from foundations bearing the names of Kansas City’s first families could bring the talent. Parents, Ayers suggests, would come along if the system improves.

If you build it, proponents of a choice model say like a mantra, they will come.

Now the decision, with questions unanswered but promise possible, goes to state board of education members and lawmakers.

Will they build it?

“It’s not an experimentation,” Patrick Dobard said. “We actually take great offense at that. It’s the empowerment of individuals to continue to do what educators should do, to always look to transform.”

In the same interview, the CEO of the district's philanthropic-and-operator-recruitment arm New Schools for New Orleans put his counterargument even more forcefully.

"I think urban school districts across the country have basically been running a three-decade failed experiment in how to serve low income kids," Neerav Kingsland said. "I know the results of the first experiment and I think we've found something fundamentally different and we're eight years in and I can say that it's working"

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The developers of the CEE-Trust plan for state intervention into unaccredited Missouri school districts, specially designed for Kansas City, follows the map laid out in New Orleans but does not import the city's model wholesale.

The CEE-Trust plan aims to take advantage of New Orleans' and other cities experiences with education reform and not repeat their mistakes. The plan for Kansas City, for example, would keep facilities and bussing under the auspices of a Community Schools Office, rather than delegate those responsibilities to individual schools as New Orleans has, where bussing often makes up nearly 10 percent of a school's budget.

It also would use savings from the elimination of a central district office (New Orleans has retained a small district-within-a-district, with just 20 schools outside of the state-run structure),