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The Big Easy's School Revolution

John White, superintendent of New Orleans' public schools: 'In other cities, charter schools exist in spite of the system. Here they are the system.'

By [MATTHEW KAMINSKI](#)

New Orleans

At John McDonogh High School in this city's Esplanade Ridge district, the new superintendent points to a broken window boarded up with plastic. Nobody thought to fix it properly. "Why? Because these are the poor kids," says John White, who arrived in New Orleans this spring. "The message is: 'We don't care.'"

John Mac is one of the worst schools in New Orleans, which makes it one of the worst in America. It scored 30 out of 200 on a statewide performance scale when 75 counts as "failing." In a school built for 800 students, 340 are enrolled. Virtually all are African-American. A couple years ago, an armed gang burst into the cafeteria and assassinated a student.

Mr. White looks in on classrooms. In one, groups of seniors chat loudly and puzzle over a basic algebra problem. In another the teacher struggles to start a conversation about a USA Today article that few students had read. A girl in the corner sits with a jacket over her head, headphones in both ears.

"Just to put that in context, that's a criminal act against these kids," says Mr. White, after walking out. "It's unacceptable to not have a well-planned, rigorous lesson. It's fundamentally unacceptable." He pauses and refers to the algebra class. "I just can't get over that. You have these kids doing sixth-, seventh-grade math in a normal and typical school system [and here] in a 12th-grade year. And not doing it well. Well, we're going to change that."



Terry Shoffner

More than any other superintendent in America, Mr. White can make good on this promise. He heads the Recovery School District, which includes most schools in New Orleans and surrounding areas, and has broad powers over them. Hurricane Katrina wiped out resistance from politicians and unions and improbably made the Big Easy a national laboratory of educational reform.

Four out of five kids in New Orleans attend independent public charters. The schools under Mr. White's supervision are open to all students no matter where they live. "In other cities, charter schools exist in spite of the system," Mr. White says. "Here charter schools are the system."

The results are encouraging. Five years ago, 23% of children scored at or above "basic" on state tests; now 48% do. Before Katrina, 62% attended failing schools; less than a fifth do today. The gap between city kids and the rest of the state is narrowing.

But New Orleans schools still have a ways to go. A state report this week based on scores, graduation rates and attendance records said the majority of the city's schools merited a D grade or worse.

Enter Mr. White, a sort of reform superintendent 2.0., to try to take New Orleans to the next level. Predecessors Paul Vallas and Paul Pastorek shook up the schools, in the way the charismatic Michelle Rhee did in Washington, D.C. Mr. White spent five years working for another trailblazer, Joel Klein in New York. As deputy superintendent, Mr. White weeded out bad schools and nurtured the charter school zone in Harlem. His task here is to hold and build on the gains so far.

By 2013, New Orleans plans to have the country's first "all charter" school system. The Recovery School District still directly manages 16 schools and oversees 73 charters. The toughest cases were left for last, including five classically bad, low-income, urban high schools like John Mac that will be chartered.

Over the longer run, the challenge is to make the changes stick. No urban, minority school district has shown that in the face of political opposition a freer market for schools can endure. New Orleans can't forever rely on enthusiasm and young recruits from the Teach For America (TFA) program. Hence all the talk about "scaling up," "sustainability" and "institutionalizing parent choice," jargon that Mr. White also uses.

He is a serious, tall and except for a few flecks of gray in his neat hair, boyish-looking 35-year-old. His preppie ensemble (khakis, blue shirt and a blue and purple tie) harks back to his school days at elite St. Albans in Washington. Jack Loup, who leads the Coalition for Louisiana Public Education and opposes the state's education reforms, criticizes his youth, Northeast roots and the lack of a Ph.D. in education.

Mr. White has navigated difficult education politics before in stints in New Jersey and Chicago, where he ran TFA's operations, and most of all during New York's "Joel and Randi wars"—between Mr. Klein and the city's powerful teachers union boss Randi Weingarten. He was at the center of pitched battles over the city's plans to co-locate charters at existing public schools in Harlem.

New York taught him "mainly that the school is the unit that matters," Mr. White says, "and that great schools often exist in spite of unsupportive, often intrusive, school district offices." Traditional government agencies find it hard to muster "the intensive strategic focus" needed to fix bad schools, he adds.

For generations, money was thrown at urban school systems; regulations were strengthened; school boards were empowered. Unions won tenure and other great benefits for their teachers. All of these efforts came from the top

down. None improved outcomes for minority students. "We have tended as a country to solve problems like this more through generating energy by way of our entrepreneurs," says Mr. White. "The approach [in New Orleans] is just government facilitating an entrepreneurial solution to this inequity."

Louisiana started to practice this philosophy before Katrina. The state created the Recovery School District in 2003 to take over the city's weak schools. "It was recovery from academic failure," says Leslie Jacobs, not a storm. Ms. Jacobs, a businesswoman and local activist who fought for the reform, says it "was modeled on Chapter 11 bankruptcy law." Then in 2005, Katrina closed the schools for the fall term. All teachers were let go, and as kids have returned about one in five has gone back to their jobs.

Suddenly it was a different place. Schools started from scratch under new management with broad authority to hire and fire their staff. Teachers lost collective-bargaining rights. Strange bedfellows—older African-American principals, civic activists, business people—came together to rebuild the schools. Charter boards filled up with local notables. "Success in education reform created confidence that other reforms could be done," says Greg Rusovich, a prominent businessman and Republican donor. He mentions the overhaul of the New Orleans police, the levee board and city procurement.

For now, Mr. White can rely on a satisfied customer base and engaged community. Surveys show that a majority of parents think the schools are better. Louisiana's Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal and New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, a Democrat, are behind him.

The immediate priority will be the overdue overhaul of the high schools. Initially the focus was on the younger kids, who hadn't been "ill-served" (in Mr. White's words) by years of poor schooling. At the high-school level, crime, drugs, weapons and other problems walk through the door. An unusually high share of older students in New Orleans is technically homeless, defined as living apart from their parents. FirstLine, a local charter group, this fall started the first "turnaround" experiment at Joseph Clark H.S. in the historic Tremé district, where scores are even lower than at John Mac.

Mr. White sits in his Audi outside John Mac's red brick building. "The incredible thing about our structure," he says, is that "unlike New York or Philadelphia, our role is the wholesale transformation of this school." This summer, he put a new principal at John Mac. Halls once jammed with kids during class time are now clear. This week he announced a major renovation of the building. A new operator will probably run the school by next year.

On the West Bank of the Mississippi, O. Perry Walker High was once John Mac. Its student profile is identical, poor and black. Five years ago, the district turned the school over to a local charter association founded in a living room. Mary Laurie, the principal at Walker, has worked in New Orleans schools for decades and "walked the union line" in the 1990 teacher strike. "We said we were doing it on behalf of children, but we meant on behalf of adults," says the African-American educator. "For too long, we did not do a good job and we have to own up to it."

Ms. Laurie knows what she likes about the new system: "autonomy, autonomy, autonomy." At Walker, she decided to separate the girls and boys in class the first two years. She pushed dance and the arts. The marching band is now one of the best in the South. She brought back Advanced Placement courses after a 20-year absence and restarted a student newspaper. The school stays open until 7 p.m. and on weekends for students so it can be a "safe place" from the hard streets, she says. Kids wear IDs and uniforms. The halls are spotless and freshly painted. The classes look disciplined but lively.

"In terms of just 'we take every single kid and educate them in a way that is reasonably rigorous and addresses both career needs and college prep needs,' they are the hallmark school right now," says Mr. White. "I wouldn't say they are, by [Ms. Laurie's] admission, anywhere close to where they need to be and want to be." The state report card gave Walker a C+. John Mac failed.

Older black educators like Ms. Laurie started New Orleans down the reform path after Katrina, says Ms. Jacobs: "They were the ones who did the turnarounds, not the young punks." As word spread, young college graduates

and outside charter groups flooded the zone. New Orleans has one of the country's largest TFA contingents.

There are growing pains. Many parents are puzzled by the choices. Only a single privately published guide exists to help them. Earlier this fall, Mr. White proposed a central enrollment system, which the Times-Picayune newspaper endorsed in a backhanded way as long overdue.

As this week's state report showed, many independent schools aren't doing well. Mr. White admits shortcomings but says these schools are far easier to hold responsible in "a much more rigorous and cleaner process." His office reviews charter licenses yearly and revokes them regularly. In a traditional system, districts struggle for years to close bad schools.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, in a lawsuit against the Recovery District, alleges that special-needs kids are systematically excluded and badly served by charters. Independent schools blanch at the high cost and can't draw on help from a central school system. Mr. White says the district is in talks with the Center, and defends the charters, which he adds have found "innovative" solutions for special-needs students. Walker, for example, specializes in kids with verbal problems. In an all-charter system, no students will be excluded. And before Katrina, 11% of special-needs students tested at grade level, 36% do now.

The racial tensions usually so prominent in New Orleans politics have receded after Katrina, but probably not forever. It is not lost on many that Mr. White is another white man brought in to fix things. "Recovery" was always supposed to be temporary. At some point, direct oversight over schools will return to local, probably elected, authorities.

An election for the state school board later this month will test reform's appeal. "I say you have the most local form of control that exists—community members actually governing their schools," says Mr. White. But he says he must build support to "institutionalize" a free choice system. Mr. Landrieu, the first white mayor of New Orleans in 31 years, points to the key buy-in constituency: the African-American mother. "No mother wants their child to go to a low-performing school," he says.

Though Katrina was unique, the New Orleans reform model has found imitators. Michigan's governor wants to put Detroit's failing schools under a state-run agency and give them autonomy. Tennessee modeled its reforms on it. But New Orleans is moving to new ground. Charismatic leadership broke taboos and brought a sense of urgency. Mr. White is trying something else—to help an open system of independent public schools mature and outlive him in the Big Easy.

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