

EDUCATION MATTERS

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Inside the Nation's Biggest Experiment in School Choice

By Stephanie Banchoero

Kenisha Nelson tried to walk her son Kaleb into his new elementary school, Akili Academy, but the third grader slipped from her hand and bolted to the front door. "I got this, mom," he said. Kenisha Nelson reviewed homework with her son, who started at Akili Academy this year for third grade. His previous school, Benjamin E. Mays, was closed for failing to meet state testing goals. Ms. Nelson started working in February to choose a new school for Kaleb.

“Graduation rates went to 78% last year from 52% before Katrina—surpassing Detroit, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, CA, cities also struggling to boost achievement among lower-income students.”

The first day of school turned out to be the easiest leg of Ms. Nelson’s journey through the nation’s largest experiment in school choice. She had searched since winter for the best campus with open spots for her 8-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter.

In the end, she said, “It was a great outcome and worth missing those days at work and running around to schools to find good ones.”

There is broad acknowledgment that local schools are performing better since Hurricane Katrina washed away New Orleans’ failing public education system and state authorities took control of many campuses here.

Graduation rates went to 78 percent last year from 52 percent before Katrina—surpassing Detroit, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, CA, cities also struggling to boost achievement among lower-income students. The share of New Orleans students proficient in math, reading, science and social studies increased to 58 percent in 2012 from 35 percent before the 2005 storm, state data shows.

School officials now want to ramp up improvements, saying the city’s education marketplace still needs work. The enrollment system is complicated. There are far fewer available seats at good schools than at poor ones, leaving many families to choose between bad and worse. And few students can get into top-rated schools because of limited seats and

strict admissions policies.

Boosters, including Governor Bobby Jindal, say New Orleans points to the future of public education. Giving parents a choice of schools, they say, fosters competition that weeds out badly run campuses. Academically, New Orleans is improving faster than any school district in Louisiana.

Many parents say it takes extra effort to find an acceptable campus. “If parents want a good school for their kids,” said Ms. Nelson, a 36-year-old single mother, “they have to take a stand and do all the work themselves.”

Leslie Jacobs, a businesswoman who served on the state board of education and helped guide the schools overhaul, said New Orleans has built a foundation for better schools since the hurricane. “Now we are entering into phase two, where we need to build a more

sophisticated model,” she said. “The next few years will be the bigger push up the hill.”

State Schools Superintendent John White, who arrived in Louisiana two years ago, supports the idea of public education as a marketplace but said the New Orleans system had lacked order. “Government needs to be here for equity of resources, equity of access, and equity of outcomes,” said the 37-year-old former executive of Teach for America and former deputy chancellor of New York City Schools.

Most of the city’s schools were failing long before Katrina destroyed dozens of campuses. The storm killed at least 1,800 people and displaced about 65,000 students, mostly low-income African Americans.

The Orleans Parish School Board fired its teachers after the storm, and the state board of education took control of all but the thirteen best schools, which remain under the local board.

The state converted most of the campuses into charter schools, which hired their own nonunion teachers. Since Katrina, the average teacher salary in New Orleans was 20 percent higher than before the storm: \$47,878 compared with the statewide average of \$49,246, state



data shows.

New Orleans, which previously spent about the same as other Louisiana districts, tallied about \$13,000 per pupil in 2011, compared with the state spending average of \$11,000 that year, according to state data. The city spent \$8,000 per pupil before Katrina, records show.

Denver, Chicago, and Cleveland have embraced school choice on a smaller scale, but none give as much freedom—to parents and campuses—as New Orleans does: about 84 percent of its 42,000 public school students attend public charters, the largest share of any district in the United States.

For the school year that started in August, parents picked among seventy-eight charter schools, as well as eight traditional campuses, one independent school with a board appointed by the governor, and thirty-eight private schools that are paid with state-issued tuition vouchers. To help guide the selection,



school care, and campus safety, in addition to academic ratings.

Jennifer Nin's 8-year-old son has already attended three schools, looking for the best educational fit. He now attends Akili Academy of New Orleans, where, Ms. Nin said, he is "thriving and loving it" after two years at less-than-desirable schools.

"I like knowing that I have the freedom to decide where my son goes to school," Ms. Nin said. "It gives me the power to pick something better for him."

Parents are empowered to vote

The application process is made more complicated because parents don't know the number of open seats expected at schools each year. Parents earlier this year made selections not knowing, for example, that only three third-grade seats were open at B-rated schools in the lottery for fall.

Luck also plays a role in the schools marketplace. Student applications are randomly assigned a number that helps determine admissions in rank order.

None of New Orleans' eight A-rated schools—all charter schools under the control of the local school board—participated in the citywide lottery. The board voted last year to force the charters into participating when their licenses come up for renewal, which for some is as long as a decade away.

Aesha Rasheed, a community activist who created a popular school guide explaining admission requirements, said that after Katrina, parents were "put in charge of their children's education and sent out to navigate a complex system where not all schools played fair."

For Ms. Nelson, the quest began in February, at the annual Schools Expo held in the Superdome. Ms. Nelson, who lost her husband four years ago in a homicide, needed to find schools for two of her three children. "It's so overwhelming," she said, moving through the crowd past display tables.

"The application process is made more complicated because parents don't know the number of open seats expected at schools each year."

public schools are issued grades of A to F, based on academic performance.

Despite the city's rapidly improving student test scores, most schools are still far from earning top ratings, limiting parent choices.

For New Orleans parents, the school-choice system adds a level of involvement well beyond getting children dressed, fed, and out the door in time. In applying for a new school, many families take into account such factors as the distance from home and work, where siblings are enrolled, the availability of after-

with their feet, although it can be a slow and rocky path, with thousands of children spending a year or more at F schools.

Nika Burns this spring decided to keep her two sons at a school that carried an F grade last school year, even though there were higher-rated schools closer to home. Her children objected to a move, she said, because "they feel loved and nurtured and cared for" at William J. Fischer Accelerated Academy. She also worried about the boys keeping up academically at another campus.

Authorities were closing the school where her son Kaleb attended—the F-rated Benjamin E. Mays—for repeatedly failing to meet state testing goals. Ms. Nelson also needed a high school for her daughter, Kaylan, who was entering ninth grade. Her youngest son was in preschool.

The pressure triggered nightmares, Ms. Nelson said, of her daughter landing at a violent school and her son stuck in the principal's office for hyperactivity. Ms. Nelson moved Kaleb to the Mays charter school three years ago, she said, because his kinetic nature didn't mesh with his previous charter school's strict discipline.

Kaleb, who earned A's in second grade at Mays, said teachers there let him take short "brain breaks," to play basketball or help in the principal's office, when he got antsy.

Ms. Nelson applied to five schools for Kaleb and three for Kaylan. The citywide application allows for as many as eight schools per student. New Orleans parents apply to three, on average. Ms. Nelson said she selected only the schools she wanted.

Of the twenty-one public high schools in the lottery, just six were rated above D. Kaylan Nelson applied to one B-rated high school and one C-rated, competing with more than 1,400 eighth-graders for 150 open ninth-grade seats at the two campuses.

For Kaleb, Ms. Nelson selected Benjamin Franklin Elementary Math and Science, a B-rated school. But the choice was doomed from the start. Though Ms. Nelson didn't know it, Franklin had no openings for third grade. Her other four choices were a C-rated charter and three private schools.

In May, Kaleb was assigned to his

second choice, Upperroom Bible Church Academy, a private school. Ms. Nelson said she liked the school when her daughter had briefly attended before Katrina. However, just 21 percent of voucher students passed state exams last school year at Upperroom.

Later in May, Ms. Nelson was notified that Upperroom was barred from accepting new voucher students because of the school's poor exam results. In July, Kaleb was in the next round of the lottery and Ms. Nelson selected Akili Academy, a C-rated charter school that officials said had openings in third grade.

Ms. Nelson learned in July, a month before school started, that her son was admitted. After his first day, Kaleb's teacher phoned Ms. Nelson to say the boy was smart and attentive. "I nearly cried with relief," she said.

Initially, Ms. Nelson's daughter didn't get into either school she had selected in the lottery. In spring, Ms. Nelson made several visits to McDonogh 35 High School, a storied campus that was the first public high school in Louisiana for African Americans, pushing school officials to enroll her daughter. It holds a C grade. In July, she learned a slot opened for her daughter.

State officials say they are working to bring better order to the marketplace, opening "family resource centers" to help parents navigate the choice system, for example. Mr. White initiated the citywide lottery system two years ago.

This year, for the first time, the lottery incorporated private schools that accept state vouchers. A few high-rated public schools run by the local board also participated for the first time but dropped out after the first round, returning to a selection process controlled by individual principals. School board officials said those schools would return to the lottery next year.

As waiting lists continue to grow, administrators are searching for ways to make the system more efficient. However, almost all staff and teachers agree, the questions shouldn't center on how exactly students get accepted into school, but instead: Why can't we create more? ■

This article was originally posted in the September 29, 2013, edition of the Wall Street Journal. It has been edited for length.



Ten New Year's Resolutions for Teachers



1. Stay Positive

Coming off a much-needed break, it's time to figure out how to make your classroom a happy place for you and your students in the long stretch to summer. The first step to making your classroom a positive place for your students is to maintain an optimistic attitude yourself.

2. Spice Up Your Classroom Routine

Try one new technology or instructional technique each month to keep things new and challenging for you and your students. Making a list and assigning one new thing to each month will help you actually stick to this resolution.

3. Build Fitness into Your Curriculum

It wouldn't be a resolution list without some mention of better health. Make it a classroom affair with healthy eating lessons, integrating movement into your day-to-day activities, and just

encouraging you and your students to take care of your bodies.

4. Get Your Work/Life Balance in Order

As best you can, keep school work at school and enjoy your time at home. Making yourself happy will be better for you AND your students.

5. Give Individual Time and Attention to Students

It doesn't have to be formal one-on-ones, tutoring or meetings, but try to integrate a rotating classroom job in which your students help you do something. You can check in with him/her individually and see how everything is going (whether he's the best, worst, loudest, or quietest student in class).

6. Get Organized—Work Smarter, Not Harder

Don't wait until spring to do your spring cleaning. The start of a new year is a great opportunity to re-organize your classroom and get rid of any clutter.

7. Don't Let Admin and School Policies Get You Down

There is nothing you can do to change those annoying policies, unnecessary meetings or mounds of paperwork, so try to take a Zen approach about the situation rather than letting that sour mood infest you and your classroom.

8. Set Goals and Avoid Autopilot Mode

While it may be unrealistic for you to set goals for your entire school, you can set one or two goals for each month. Write the goal(s) on your calendar so you can remember to make them a priority.

9. Get Students Involved/ Empowered

By giving students more control over their assignments and activities, they will hopefully take ownership of their education and use their talents and interests in a positive way.

10. Make Better Use of Planning

Resolve to bust it out during your planning time so you can take less (or hopefully no) work home with you. It's tempting to take the much-needed break during your day, but it'll feel even better to walk away with an empty bag at the end of the day. ■

This article was adapted from Annie Condrón's list of teacher resolutions on TeachHUB.com

AAE Signs onto National School Choice Week in 2014



At the end of January, the grassroots movement known as National School Choice Week will once again take shape in schools, districts, and cities across the country. From January 26 to February 1, 2014, school choice advocates across the nation will gather to demonstrate their belief that parents should be empowered to choose the best educational environments for their children. AAE is proud to be a partner in this unprecedented opportunity to shine a positive spotlight on the need for effective education options for all students and teachers.

AAE believes that parents should be empowered to choose the best educational environments for their children. Students learn differently; therefore, a one-size-fits-all learning environment is no longer conducive to optimum learning. As educators we also recognize the possibilities for advancement and positive growth in the profession through school choice. Here at AAE, we support and represent educators from all education settings.



“Students learn differently; therefore, a one-size-fits-all learning environment is no longer conducive to optimum learning.”

During National School Choice Week, AAE is able to celebrate their choices as well!

National School Choice Week was created to provide a concentrated focus on the mission—a time for the media and the public to hear a resounding message and a time to bring new voices into the chorus. This grassroots movement is a nonpartisan, nonpolitical public awareness effort, welcoming Americans from a variety of backgrounds to get involved.

Last year over 3,600 events were organized across all 50 states, over 3,000 schools celebrated by holding special events, 29 governors and dozens of mayors issued proclamations, and over 2,000 news stories highlighted the Week. National School Choice Week looks forward to even more support this year as AAE will be hosting events across the country.

Be a part of the movement this month! Sign up for updates about this national upcoming event and stay tuned for information about AAE’s School Choice Week events in your state.

Visit www.aechararters.org/schoolchoiceweek and www.nationalschoolchoiceweek.com for more information. We hope you’ll get involved!

Q&A

AAE Member Josh Woodward on School Choice

AAE interviewed member teacher Josh Woodward about the affects of school choice on his career. Josh is a lead teacher at Carpe Diem Meridian Charter School in Indianapolis, Indiana. A passionate advocate for education reform, Josh attended AAE's National Leadership Academy conference in Little Rock this summer. He is currently in his 5th year of teaching.

What does "school choice" mean to you?

School choice to me is the ability for kids, parents, and educators to choose a school that works best for them.

In what ways has school choice contributed to your career?

School choice is the reason why I am in the classroom while still in law school. If it were not for the school where I currently work, the opportunities I have here, the colleagues I work with and the kids—I would be in law school full time and no longer in education.

How do your colleagues feel about school choice?

We have a small school that is fairly progressive with reform-minded individuals who did not become educators through the traditional pathway, so I would say that my colleagues are all very pro-school choice.

How do you think school choice affects teachers?

It allows educators options to choose a school environment that works best for them and where they can be most successful with their students. Some teachers want a traditional 8-2:30 job with step pay increases each year until they retire—which is fine! Other teachers want a different, more reform-minded atmosphere with different expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities. School choice provides teachers with those options.

How do you think school choice affects students?

It allows parents to choose a school that works best for their children. It is ridiculous for a parent/student to be restricted to attend a school based on their zip code and property taxes. School choice allows parents and students options—which is a fundamental right in our country.

What do you think is the future of school choice?

I would hope that the district vs. charter debate/hostility can finally end, and we can all just work together to provide schools and options that are best for kids. With this, I hope for increased accountability on schools to ensure that those not properly serving and educating kids are reformed or closed—the same goes for teacher prep programs/schools. I also hope that funding becomes more equal as opposed to remaining solely tied to where a student lives. ■

Sound Off:

Do you have opinions or firsthand knowledge of school choice in action? Let AAE know!

What do you think about school choice? Are you a parent benefiting from school choice policy? Do you love teaching in a virtual or public charter school? Do you support open enrollment in your state or district? Make your voice heard. Email AAE with your letters, comments, or articles for consideration in future editions of Education Matters. Email editor@aaeteachers.org.



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from all of us at the Association
 of American Educators



NEW RESOURCE: AAE Professional Development Calendar

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