

## Commentary on the Times-Picayune's May 13<sup>th</sup> Editorial on Paul Pastorek

By

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This is a commentary and challenge to *The Times-Picayune's* editorial on May 13, 2011 entitled "Education reformer Paul Pastorek moves on: An editorial." The editorial glorified the achievements of the Recovery School District (RSD), glowingly reporting unprecedented progress in turning around failing schools. The editorial stated that there were significantly fewer failing schools now than prior to Katrina. While the TP praised Mr. Pastorek, it went on to disparage the Coalition for Louisiana Public Education as "some obstructionists... looking to taking advantage of the moment" with respect to educational reform.

First, let me comment on the disparaging characterization of the Coalition implying that it consists of a small group of obstructionists. The Coalition includes a diverse group of highly respected and experienced education professionals including school board members, school superintendents, principals, teachers, leadership from the majority of professional educational associations across the state, retired administrators, and educational researchers all united under a single mission to "*Make Louisiana First in Education.*" The Coalition was founded by Jack Loup, president of the St. Tammany School Board. Its focus is on the following top ten issues challenging Louisiana public schools: 1.) State Revenue; 2.) Reinstatement of the Growth Factor in the Minimum Foundation; 3.) End to Unfunded Mandates; 4.) Local Governance; 5.) Accountability at all Levels; 6.) School Take-overs in the RSD; 7.) Letter Grades for School Districts; 8.) Value-added Assessments for Teachers and Principals; 9.) Student-based Budgeting; and 10.) Retirement and Health Care Costs.

Currently, the Coalition is working closely with state legislators to achieve our mission for the betterment of all schools and all students in Louisiana. Yet, the TP did not have the professional courtesy of

learning anything directly about the dedicated work of this group before disparaging it. Instead, the TP continued as usual to proceed with its one-sided and biased reporting on this issue.

Now, let me comment on the “turn around” claims of the TP regarding the RSD. Studies by Research on Reforms (ROR) a charter member of the Coalition, as well as other education researchers have continuously reported on the lack of significant achievement gains of the RSD specifically based on the 2014 goals and objectives of Louisiana’s accountability program. Yet, the TP continues to influence the public with propaganda of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), public education entrepreneurs, and some charter proponents as to the tremendous progress made by the schools in the RSD.

Let us put this issue in its historical perspective. In a Machiavellian, politically motivated take-over move that was implemented only in Orleans Parish, the Louisiana State Legislature declared it to be a “district in academic crisis” in November, 2005. Under legislation known as ACT 35, schools with a 2005 baseline School Performance School Score (SPS) below the state’s average SPS of 87.4 were declared FAILING, taken over by the LDOE, and transferred to the Recovery School District (RSD). The failing threshold for all other LEA’s remained at a SPS lower than 60.0. Under this new state criterion, approximately 95 schools in Orleans were classified as FAILING; i.e. 70 schools were labeled as Academically Unacceptable (AU) while 25 schools were labeled as either 1 or 2 Stars. Approximately 53,000 students attended these FAILING schools.

Currently the state’s 2010 average baseline SPS is 91.8. Using the same criterion for defining failing schools in Orleans that was applied in 2005, 90% of the RSD’s 45 schools that had 2010 baseline SPSs would be classified as FAILING. This is only 10% less than the number of failing schools in 2005. So where is the dramatic improvement, considering also that approximately 90% of the RSD’s 21,353 students attended these failing schools? Based on these data, it is extremely difficult to understand why anyone would proclaim that the RSD has been successful in significantly turning schools around in Orleans Parish. Table 1 graphically depicts the results presented above.

<b>Table 1</b> RSD Schools Scoring Below the State's Average SPS in 2005 and 2010		
	<b>2005</b> (State Avg. SPS = 87.4)	<b>2010</b> (State Avg. SPS = 91.8)
<b>Percent of Failing RSD Schools</b>	<b>100%</b> (N=95)	<b>90%</b> (N=45)
<b>Percent of RSD Students Attending Failing Schools</b>	<b>100%</b> (N=53,000)	<b>90%</b> (N=21,353)
<b>Total No. Schools</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>50</b>
<small>Source: LDOE's website under School Performance Accountability Reports.</small>		

The criterion used to label failing schools in Orleans in 2005 must be maintained if valid and meaningful comparisons of the RSD are to be made about its progress post -Katrina. To change the criterion now for labeling schools as failing is a politically conceived machination that appears to be created to deceive the public in order to promote the market-driven goals of the new public education entrepreneurs and to

increase the number of failing schools turned over to privately run “public schools” in Louisiana. This is really what the state is doing.

However, the state’s average is no longer used as the failing threshold which is to the RSD’s benefit. The failing SPS threshold is now back to below 60.0. In 2011, the threshold will be raised statewide to 74.9 and in 2012 it will again be raised to 89.9. A large number of “non-failing” labeled schools, i.e., those that are currently labeled either as 1 or 2 Stars in Orleans, as well as the rest of the state, will be labeled as failing unless significant improvement in achievement occurs. Further exacerbating and confusing this situation will be the insipid use of letter grades to categorize schools beginning in 2011. Thus, unless significant improvement occurs this year, it can be estimated that over 90% of the schools in the RSD will be labeled with a “D” or “F”. That includes most of the charters and all of the traditional schools.

Given the gravity of the current educational quagmire confronting the public today, it is unfortunate that *The Times-Picayune* continues to be extremely myopic and biased with respect to its one-sided reporting on the success of the current reform initiatives of the former state superintendent, Paul Pastorek. Instead, it continues its simplistic reporting of this extremely complex issue and continues to pander to the misinformation and propaganda generated by the proponents of this market driven approach to public education, even though no quantitative or qualitative evaluations exist after five years to justify the continued existence of the RSD.

Unfortunately, former state superintendent Paul Pastorek’s bully pulpit reform legacy will continue through another inexperienced non-educator, currently only a few weeks in the position of RSD superintendent, and now being recommended by the Governor to become the new interim state superintendent. The Coalition is vehemently opposed to this recommendation since it does not follow state law. Now, will the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) go along with this irresponsible RSD conspiracy, or will they have the stamina and political will to resist for the good of our children's future?