

Response to *The Times Picayune* Article “Recovery School District
Academic Gains Challenged”

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On June 27, 2011, *The Times Picayune* compared the statistical procedures used by Research on Reforms (ROR) and the Recovery School District (RSD) to assess academic progress.¹ The article on ROR’s methodology was based on a recent report that this author published June 13, 2011 questioning the exaggerated achievement claims by Mr. John White, new superintendent of the RSD.² Mr. White recently stated that “...There are now only 18 percent of those youngsters, who attend failing schools ...so what exists, works.”³ In response, ROR has consistently refuted that claim and maintains its position today.

The Times Picayune reporter, Andrew Vanacore, presented a fairly balanced view of the major issues raised the report. This response is intended to amplify issues raised in the report that were not addressed in *The Times Picayune*’s article as well as to focus on the claim that support for the RSD’s approach is gaining around the country. The following is presented for consideration by education stakeholders:

1. ROR still maintains that White’s statement, “so what exists works” deliberately misled the public and exaggerated the nebulous accomplishments of the RSD. The strategy of aggregating data from both the RSD and the OPSB districts is typically used by the RSD and its proponents to promote the

¹ “Recovery School District academic-gains challenged” *The Times Picayune*, Andrew Vanacore, 6/27/2011. http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2011/06/recovery_school_district_acade.html

² Hatfield, Charles, Myth or Fact: Only 18% of RSD’s Students Attend Failing Schools, *June*, 2011. www.researchonreforms.org

³ “Bills to roll back New Orleans education changes defeated in Legislature,” *The Times Picayune*, June 02, 2011

success of this “reform” movement.⁴ Aggregating the performance data from the high performing schools of OPSB with that of the RSD results in a much distorted picture of the achievement progress in New Orleans since Katrina. ROR’s immediate concern, as well as that of many education stakeholders in New Orleans, is on the progress made by the RSD since Katrina, not the OPSB.

2. It is essential to put the concept of a “failing school” into perspective. If one insists on comparing achievement levels of the New Orleans Public Schools in 2005 to those in 2010, then the same failing criterion must be used for a valid comparison. In 2005, New Orleans Public Schools were classified as failing if their 2005 Baseline SPS was lower than the state’s average of 87.4.⁵ Approximately 95 or 85% of 108 schools with a SPS met that criterion. Approximately 83% of the public school students attended these schools.⁶ If the same SPS criterion of 87.4 had been applied to schools in the two independent school districts of New Orleans, i.e., RSD and OPSB, during the 2010-11 school year, 47 or 71% of the 66 schools with a SPS would have been classified as failing. Over 65% of the public school students in the city would have attended these schools.⁷ It should

⁴ “Test Scores are in, and We Rock! Again!!” *Educate Now*, May 24, 2011 (<http://educatenow.net/2011/05/24/2011-test-scores-are-in-and-we-rock-again/?ref=titl>).

⁵ - **In 2004, Louisiana Revised Statute 17:10.6 (R.S. 17:10.6)** established the criteria for a school district in crisis: “...‘Academically in crisis’ means any local system in which more than thirty schools are academically unacceptable or more than fifty percent of its students attend schools that are academically unacceptable”. <http://law.justia.com/louisiana/codes/143/285616.html>
- **In 2005 after Katrina, Louisiana Revised Statute 17:10.7 (R.S. 17:10.7 - ACT 35)** established the criterion that if a school fell **below the State’s average**; was in a school district in “academic crisis” as per R.S. 17:10.6 as Stated above; and at least one school was eligible to be transferred to the RSD, was declared a failing school and was transferred to the RSD. <http://law.justia.com/louisiana/codes/143/330380.html>

⁶ Figures do not include schools previously taken over by the RSD and had no SPS.
LDOE’s 2004-05 MFP Funded Reports.
http://www.louisianaschools.net/offices/infomanagement/student_enrollment_data.html

LDOE’s 2004-05 District Accountability Report.
http://www.louisianaschools.net/data/district_accountability_reports.aspx

⁷ Figures do not include the 24 schools without a SPS
LDOE’s 2010-11 MFP Funded Reports.
http://www.louisianaschools.net/offices/infomanagement/student_enrollment_data.html

LDOE’s 2009-10 District Accountability Report.
http://www.louisianaschools.net/data/district_accountability_reports.aspx

be noted that only 3 or 19% of the 16 OPSB schools would have been classified as failing, with 15% of their students attending them. However, in the RSD, 44 or 88% of the 50 schools would have been classified as failing with 88% of their students attending them. Fortunately for the RSD, it “dogged that bullet” since Act 35 had expired by the 2010-11 school year and the failing criterion was now back to below 60. However, the failing bar will again be raised by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) to 64.9 for the 2011-12 school year and to 74.9 for the 2012-13 school year.⁸ The new 2011 Baseline SPSs will be released by the LDOE in the fall.

3. *The Times Picayune’s* article stated that the RSD’s approach is gaining supporters around the country as national reform figures such as Arne Duncan laud the district’s progress. However, ROR continues to maintain that after five years of existence, the RSD has failed in its mission to students – with very few exceptions.⁹ Let’s take a closer look at the results of RSD’s “approach.” The following achievement facts should be emphasized to RSD supporters both locally and nationally when discussing the significance of its achievement gains:

- After 5 years of existence, the RSD’s 2010 District Performance Score (DPS) of 60.6 continues to rank as among the lowest in the state while the OPSB’s DPS is still among the highest.¹⁰
- One need only examine the 2010 Baseline SPS performance labels assigned to the RSD schools to debunk the transformation myth. Approximately 74% of the RSD schools with 2010 SPS scores were labeled either as failing or in danger of failing.¹¹
- If the new letter grade standards for 2011 had been applied to the 2010 Baseline SPSs, 93%

⁸ For the 2010-11 school year, schools with a 2010 baseline SPS between 60.0 - 64.9 were labeled as schools in danger of failing in 2011 if their SPSs didn’t dramatically improve. Schools with a 2010 SPS between 60.0 – 74.9 were also considered to be in danger of failing in 2012 unless their SPSs dramatically improved. The 2011 SPSs should be available later this fall.

⁹ *“To provide a superior learning environment in which every student, regardless of ability, attains educational success and graduates with proven skills that will provide them access to quality institutions of higher learning or the workplace.”* Recovery School District’s Strategic Plan- June, 2008

¹⁰ 2010 District Performance Scores (DPS):
www.louisianaschools.net/data/district_accountability_reports.aspx

¹¹ 2010 Baseline SPS: http://www.louisianaschools.net/data/district_accountability_reports.aspx

of the 50 RSD schools with SPSs would have received a D or F.¹²

- The fact that the RSD has reported tremendous “gains” over the past 5 years is irrelevant. What is relevant is whether the magnitude of those achievement gains is considered significant by LDOE’s standards. If one examines the 2010-11 iLEAP, LEAP and GEE proficiency levels within the context of the state’s accountability goal for 2014, the significance of these achievement gains must be questioned. This goal, established in 2002, states that all students will be performing at 100% proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. The LDOE has established annual proficiency objectives, called Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO), in order to monitor the significance of annual student progress toward achieving this 2014 goal.¹³ For example, the 2010-11 AMO for ELA on iLEAP, LEAP and GEE was attainment of a proficiency level of 68.4%. Considering the 3rd graders who took the iLEAP, only students in 23% of the RSD schools actually met or exceeded this objective. Of the 4th graders who took the LEAP, only students who attended 34% of the RSD schools met or exceeded the objective. Finally, of the 8th graders who took the LEAP test in 2011, only students who attended 22% of the RSD schools met or exceeded this proficiency objective.¹⁴ Considering that the majority of the third and fourth grade students had probably been in the RSD since the first grade, their achievement performance should be deemed pathetic rather than transformational especially since they were not “tainted” with the effects of the OPSB prior to Katrina.

Based upon the facts cited above, it is extremely difficult to understand why anyone, including those dignitaries mentioned in *The Times Picayune*’s article, can objectively claim that the transformation of New Orleans Public Schools serves as a national model for educational reform. As Mr. White is so fond of saying: “Period. End of story”.

¹² Hatfield, Charles, Have RSD Schools Really Improved Significantly Since 2005? April, 2011.
www.researchonreforms.org

¹³ Bulletin 111- *The Louisiana School, District, and State Accountability System*,
<http://doe.louisiana.gov/bese/policies.html>

¹⁴ Spring 2011 LEAP Results : http://www.louisianaschools.net/topics/leap_results.html

Spring 2011 iLEAP Results: http://www.louisianaschools.net/topics/ileap_results.html