

PAR: Schools can use charters' ideas

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NEW ORLEANS — A government watchdog group is calling on Louisiana's education department to analyze the state's independently run public charter schools with an eye toward having traditional public schools replicate successful practices in those institutions.

"The problem is that information about these practices tends to be exchanged primarily among those in the charter school community. At the same time, local school districts generally are suspicious of, if not hostile toward, charter schools," the Public Affairs Research Council said in a report released Tuesday. PAR says the Department of Education should create an advisory council to analyze best practices in Louisiana charter schools that can be replicated in traditional public schools and help develop guidelines for implementing those practices.

The report also lists a variety of "best practices" identified by PAR in its own research. Those practices include establishment of clearly defined academic and behavioral expectations for students; incentives for good conduct and initiatives to get parents involved in the school; structures for assessing student progress and using the data from those assessments to develop instruction plans; Saturday programs, summer programs and extended school days and school years.

PAR's report notes the growth in charter schools — schools that receive public funding but are run by organizations independent of local school boards — after Hurricane Katrina shut down the city of New Orleans in 2005. Most public schools had been performing poorly in the city for years and state officials took the opportunity to take over many of the schools, placing them under the governance of the state Recovery School District, which turned many over to charter organizations.

"Today, the RSD oversees 66 schools in Orleans Parish — 37 of which are charter schools. In addition, two state-authorized charter schools that predate Katrina operate in New Orleans, as well as 12 charter schools overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board," the report notes.

Test scores have been improving, PAR says in its report, although whether the improvements can be sustained is still in question.

PAR suggests that the state Department of Education maintain a Web site to provide detailed information on each charter school, and that each charter school be required to have a Web site.