



## AP: Divergent views on N.O. schools

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Numbers crunched at a symposium on the pre- and post-Hurricane Katrina education of black children in New Orleans provide yet another example of a racial divide.

Those numbers were from a survey of New Orleans voters for Tulane University's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. They showed a higher percentage of white voters (80 percent) than black voters (57 percent) who say the state made the right decision in taking over most public schools in the city. A significantly higher percentage of white people (44 percent) than black people (24 percent) say the schools have improved since Katrina. While 63 percent of white residents in the survey opposed returning control to the Orleans Parish School Board, only 49 percent of black people surveyed were opposed.

Long memories, or at least a passing knowledge of the history of the civil rights movement, might explain the greater reluctance of black voters to have the state running schools in a predominantly black city instead of a locally elected school board. "It was not until 1965 that this nation said everybody, regardless of race, had an executable, enforceable right to vote," Steve Suitts, a vice president of the Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation, noted Thursday during the Tulane symposium "Before & After Katrina: Black Education in New Orleans."

Mayor-elect Mitch Landrieu (who bridged the racial divide with a stunning 66 percent election victory in February) has no direct authority over public schools but a great deal of interest in what happens to them. This past week he named a 21-member task force to help him navigate local education issues.

Also this past week, the Cowen Institute released its 2010 report on the state of public education in New Orleans. It outlined numerous successes, including an improved culture of learning, stronger focus on instruction and progress toward rebuilding and renovating public school buildings. It also noted several "challenges," including tightening state and local budgets.

The Cowen Institute report also delves into "governance" issues arising from what it said were unclear roles and responsibilities among the entities running the schools. No surprise there, given the patchwork system of school authorities: the state education board has chartered two schools; the state Recovery School District runs 33 schools and has chartered 37 others; the Orleans Parish School Board still runs four schools and has chartered 12 others. Problems posed by that unconventional structure include a lack of clarity about who is responsible for the education of children expelled from a New Orleans school.

Problems aside, researchers and officials in Baton Rouge are watching, looking for ways to apply any successes in New Orleans to schools statewide.

The same day Landrieu named his study committee, the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana issued a report noting rising test scores and other improvements in New Orleans schools. The PAR report acknowledges it is too early to know whether the gains can be sustained, but suggests the state Department of Education study the charters with an eye toward replicating their successes.

Gov. Bobby Jindal has proposed legislation that would let schools and school districts apply for a four-year waiver of state laws or statewide policies, such as teacher pay requirements, curriculum standards, length of school day or school year and budget restrictions. The proposal to grant such charterlike independence has drawn criticism from a major teachers union, portending another fight at the Legislature about how public schools should be run and who should run them.

**Note:** The Cowen Institute telephone survey of 600 registered New Orleans voters was conducted Nov. 3-14 by Market Research Insight, and the survey has a margin for error of plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

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