



N.O. school system stirs opposition

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Numbers crunched last week 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. Also, a significantly higher percentage of whites (44 percent) than blacks (24 percent) think the schools have improved since Katrina. While 63 percent of whites in the survey opposed returning control to the Orleans Parish School Board, only 49 percent of blacks surveyed were opposed.

Long memories, or at least a passing knowledge of the history of the civil rights movement, may 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.

Last 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.

But 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 structure include a lack of clarity over who is responsible for the education of children expelled from a New Orleans school.

The same day incoming Mayor Mitch Landrieu named a study committee on the issue, the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana issued a report noting rising test scores and other improvements in New Orleans schools. And Gov. Bobby Jindal has proposed legislation that would let schools and school districts apply for a four-year waiver of state laws or policies, like teacher pay requirements, curriculum standards, length of school day or school year, and budget restrictions.

The proposal to grant such charter-like independence has already drawn criticism from a major teachers' union, portending another fight at the Legislature over how public schools should be run and who should run them.

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