

# What Will it Take?

The Recovery School District's Commitments to New Orleans



# A Message from the Superintendent

What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

This question guides the work of the Recovery School District (RSD). This plan – entitled *What Will It Take?* – attempts to answer it.



We spent 100 days meeting with community members, educators, parents, and students to gather perspectives from across the city on what the RSD should do to deliver on the promise we make to students that they will be able to graduate from college or attain a professional career. Over that time, we hosted many public meetings and met often with task force members, who gave of their time to help create a plan that will continue the remarkable progress made by New Orleans’s children.

Each of four task forces – representing community members, educators, parents, and students – created a set of recommendations from which the plan was derived; these recommendations can be viewed in their entirety at [www.rsd100days.com](http://www.rsd100days.com). Their views, and the views of the hundreds of participants who attended the task forces’ public meetings, are reflected in this document. I thank them for all they did to shape it.

Not every recommendation is included in this plan. Some proposals in this document, such as a plan for serving students at-risk of behavioral issues, combine elements of multiple

recommendations the task forces made. Others, such as a proposal for citywide school tours, a proposal for a citywide student government, and a proposal for citywide parent surveys, will be considered for future plans. Given limited resources, we tried to identify those recommendations most urgently needed in order to sustain success with our children.

But a plan is just a plan until someone actually makes it happen. So you will find in this plan a set of concrete goals and commitments. We want to be accountable for these goals and commitments, and we ask that you hold us accountable for doing what we say we would do. I look forward to showing you we can, and I invite you to track our progress at [www.rsd100days.com](http://www.rsd100days.com), where you will find up-to-date information regarding the steps we are taking toward each commitment.

When we follow through on these commitments, we will have made critical strides toward achieving our goal: the day when all children in New Orleans graduate from college or attain a professional career. Nothing could be more important.

**John C. White**  
Superintendent

# Background

## What is the Recovery School District (RSD)?



Launched in 2003, the RSD is guided by one question: *What will it take to get every student on track to graduate from college or attain a professional career?* In response to that question, the RSD transforms schools that for years have not put enough students on the path to career and college by identifying top school leaders and teachers to operate the schools, by giving them the freedom to educate children as they know best, and by giving parents the power to choose the schools that are best for their children.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the RSD applied this strategy to struggling schools throughout New Orleans, where student achievement in many schools was lagging. Most New Orleans public schools are now charter public schools for this reason. Charter school educators are empowered to teach; parents are empowered to choose their school; principals set their own budgets

so that more money gets to the classroom; community members form boards that oversee schools; and the district's central office, which is not close to the parents, the teachers, or the children, monitors schools but does not tell parents and teachers how to educate their children.

Empowered schools flourish. Rather than focusing on mandates from bureaucrats, teachers and parents work together to get all kids through college or into professional careers. In the schools, this has meant rigorous curriculum, ambitious expectations, and lots of hard work. It also means arts and music, field trips, home visits, and close relationships between teachers and students.

Those are the things you see in great schools. The RSD exists to transform struggling schools into great schools because that is what it will take for every student in New Orleans to be on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career.

# What RSD Students Have Achieved

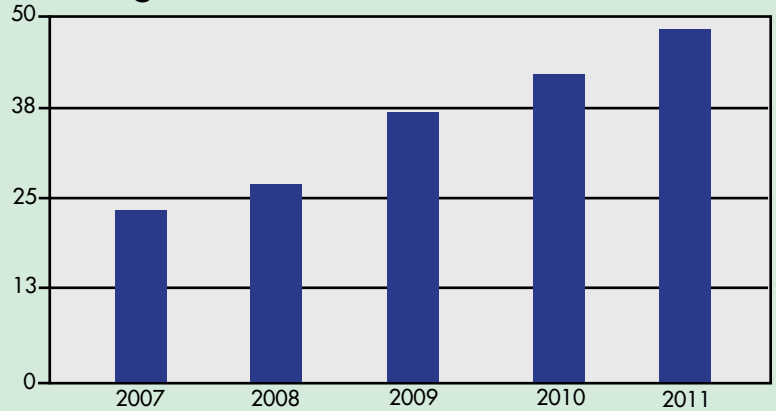
What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

This is the question RSD school leaders, teachers, social workers, and other employees ask themselves each day. And we are making progress toward meeting that goal:

- Five years ago, only 23 percent of RSD students in New Orleans scored at or above “basic” on state standardized tests. This year, 48 percent of students met this bar. That means RSD schools have more than doubled their success over the past five years, the highest rate of progress in Louisiana since 2007.
- Of all school districts in the state, RSD charter schools and district-run schools rank number one in terms of student progress since 2007.
- In 2005, 11 percent of special education students in New Orleans schools performed at their appropriate grade level. Today, 36 percent perform at that level.
- New Orleans schools are closing the achievement gap with the rest of the state. In 2005, African-American students in New Orleans performed eight points below African-American students elsewhere in Louisiana. Today, New Orleans’ African-American students actually do better than African-American students in the rest of the state.

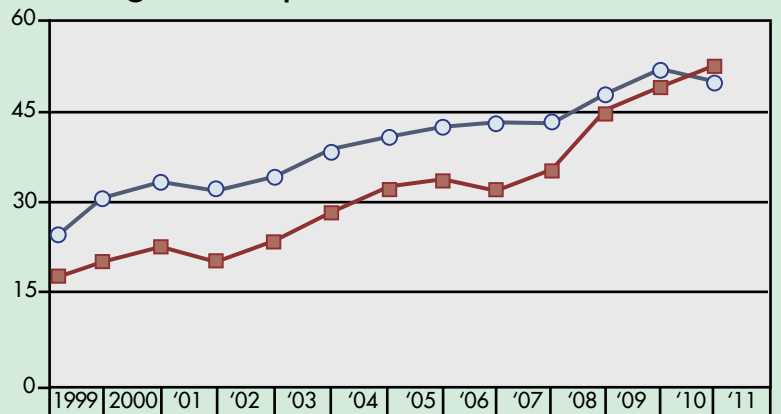
It is no wonder that President Obama’s education secretary recently called the progress in New Orleans “remarkable” and said, “I continue to be in awe of the sense of urgency, the sense of commitment, the entire community getting behind the schools” in New Orleans.

Average Percent of Students at Basic & Above



RSD schools more than doubled their success over the past five years.

Closing the Gap — Louisiana — New Orleans



Percent of black students scoring at grade level or better on state standardized tests.





## Why We Need to Do More

What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

It will take excellence, equity, and community.

Given all of this progress, some might say that we could keep doing what we're doing and expect our students to graduate from college or attain a professional career. But there is much more to do.

- Excellence: 48 percent "basic" is more than double what came before 2006, but it means only half of our students are on track for career or college.
- Equity: Of those students, we know some are doing better than others. Students with special needs, over-aged students, and too many of our young men, are not achieving at the rate of their peers and sometimes do not have access to services they need.
- Community: Too often we hear that community was left out of the process. Long-term change for children should happen alongside the community members with whom they live and grow.

What will it take? It will take commitment to excellence, belief in equity, and respect for *community*.



## RSD 100 Days Task Force Chairs

- Community Task Force: Deirdre Johnson Burel, executive director of Orleans Public Education Network; and Sarah Newell Usdin, founder and president of New Schools for New Orleans.
- Educator Task Force: Dr. Scott Cowen, president of Tulane University; and Dr. Norman Francis, president of Xavier University.
- Parent Task Force: Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, District D council member of the New Orleans City Council; and Aesha Rasheed, founder of the New Orleans Parent Organizing Network.
- Student Task Force: Doug Evans, president of the Dryades YMCA; and Erika McConduit, executive vice president of the Urban League of Greater New Orleans.



## 100 Days Process Summary



What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or attain a professional career?

It will take communities working together for children.

In May 2011, as Superintendent John White joined the RSD, the district launched a 100 Days planning process to generate feedback and recommendations from four important groups: community members, educators, parents, and students. In the time since, four task forces – one representing each group – have held public meetings, have assessed the district’s strengths and weaknesses, and have developed a set of recommendations for the RSD, focusing on those three essential principles: excellence, equity, and community.

The task forces met day and night throughout the summer to discuss the challenges, issues and successes of the RSD, as well as to generate public comment regarding RSD schools and the role they play in the community. They gathered public comment by hosting public meetings, creating a Web site and comment phone line, and accepting written comments in boxes placed at more than 30 locations around the city.

At the end of the 100 Days process, each group presented a list of recommended next steps for the district, which have been incorporated into this strategic plan. While not every recommendation was accepted in the end, every commitment in this plan has roots in those discussions. Please check [www.rsd100days.com](http://www.rsd100days.com) to find summarized notes of every task force meeting, as well as the full list of each task force’s final recommendations.

# Commitments

## Commitments to Excellence

What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or attain a professional career?

It will take academic excellence in all schools.



Each task force emphasized the importance of holding all schools to a common standard of excellence. When members defined “excellence,” several themes emerged:

- Each task force stated that schools in New Orleans have inconsistent outcomes – some perform at high levels while others remain at low levels. Many members called for changes in high schools in particular, where the gaps are most exaggerated.
- Task force members articulated the need for schools to provide a relevant, rigorous education both in and outside the classroom. Students in particular noted the need for greater connections to colleges and universities.
- Task forces also emphasized teacher effectiveness, noting the importance of providing support and professional development to current teachers, and the need for recruiting and sustaining a diverse teacher workforce.
- Finally, task force participants consistently stated that achieving academic excellence was deeply connected to achieving an overall increase in transparency and oversight in the operations of New Orleans public schools. Members urged increased transparency of information, including reports on student achievement, enrollment, discipline, budgeting, or audits.



to monitor compliance with special education, enrollment, testing, safety, and other requirements (the state Department of Education will focus on finance and administration). Schools that do well on the annual review will be permitted greater ability to self-monitor in future years, while schools that receive lower marks will be required to take on a more stringent set of reviews. Furthermore, the RSD will establish a hotline where potential violations can be reported, and will retain an investigator to discern facts on issues of serious concern.

## Commitment 3

The RSD will employ clear, strong accountability for both direct-run schools and charter schools starting Fall 2011.

President Obama has endorsed charter schools, calling them “public schools founded by parents, teachers, and civic or community organizations with broad leeway to innovate.” But freedom to innovate is a privilege. RSD direct-run schools that make progress with students should be encouraged to apply for charter school status; current charter schools that do not make progress should not have a charter school’s freedom. The RSD will recommend awarding and revoking charter school freedom based on rigorous standards:

- As part of a new proposal for charter school monitoring, the RSD will make recommendations to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) that low-performing charter schools up for review be transitioned to new management or closed.
- RSD direct-run schools achieving above a 75 School Performance Score (SPS) in 2011 or 2012 will be invited to submit a charter application to the state in those years, remaining under current management.
- RSD direct-run schools scoring between 65 and 75 in 2011 will not be transitioned or closed this year and will be invited to submit charter applications if they improve to 75 or above.
- RSD direct-run schools that do not meet the 65 threshold in 2011 will be considered for transition or closure, in which case the RSD will work with the school community to identify the right instructional program for students.

## Commitment 1

Direct-run RSD schools will improve significantly in 2011-2012, achieving greater progress in students achieving basic on LEAP, iLEAP and GEE tests than the rest of the state.

RSD central staff will be organized into “network support teams” that are accountable for the achievement outcomes of the schools to which they are assigned. The teams will assist direct-run schools in setting goals, assessing performance, giving teachers feedback, and professional development; they also will support charter schools on an as-requested basis. This new approach will ensure that all RSD schools – charter and direct-run – have the autonomy necessary to pursue their goals while being supported by teams that see student achievement as job number one.

## Commitment 2

The RSD will implement a new monitoring process for New Orleans charter schools, while not distracting educators from educating.

The RSD will conduct an annual review of all type-5 charter schools, assigning a team of educators

# Commitment 4

By Fall 2013, the RSD will establish a diverse set of high school pathways to college and to career.

High school students have diverse needs and diverse interests; there should be the right high school for every child in New Orleans. By 2013, the RSD high school portfolio will include:

- Accelerated schooling for students who are academically behind
- Career and technical schooling for students seeking pathways to professions
- Early college schooling that grants college credits during the high school years
- Mentoring-intensive schooling for students at-risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system



## Commitments to Equity

What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

It will take a citywide dedication to serving all kids and keeping all kids in school.

Task force members discussed issues of equity above all others:

- One important source of inequity task forces often mentioned was the issue of student enrollment. Though many task force members supported a family's right to choose a school, many also thought the application process should be easier for parents to navigate, that open-enrollment charter schools need to be transparent about their application process, and that the enrollment system should prioritize children attending schools in their neighborhoods.
- Task force members also emphasized that New Orleans students do not have equitable access to special education resources, adequate transportation, safe and clean facilities, and other resources.
- Each task force made it clear that it is important to provide social work services and positive behavior supports at the school level. Parents and students in particular were concerned with appropriate disciplinary procedures in schools, and students suggested specific alternatives to expulsion.



## Commitment 6

The RSD will develop a citywide enrollment system for direct-run and charter schools, starting in 2012.

Parents should not have to drop off applications at multiple schools. We should acknowledge the importance of neighborhood in admissions without compromising the parent's ability to choose. Transparent information helps in tracking the degree to which all schools serve all kids, especially students with disabilities, and retain students rather than expelling them or seeing them drop out.

Changing these conditions will require one enrollment system in which all families and schools participate together, allowing parents to submit one application, providing them clear information about their options, allowing a greater presence of neighborhood students in elementary schools, and allowing children arriving after the start of the school year to know that there is a clear process to help them find a new school.

## Commitment 5

Starting in 2011-2012, the RSD will issue an annual Equity Report that will measure and report the things that make a great school truly great.

Accountability for student achievement is at the heart of our mission. New Orleans schools are measured for success each year on the Louisiana Education Assessment of Progress (LEAP) and other tests, such as the Integrated Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (iLEAP) or Graduation Exit Examination (GEE). RSD charter and district schools have risen to the challenge, posting the state's leading gains over the past five years.

Greatness also takes a commitment to equity, ensuring all students have access and that schools keep their students, no matter their challenges. If we're going to achieve equity, we must begin by being transparent about both successes and challenges. The annual Equity Report will shine a light on the successes of schools in the following areas and will allow for honest discussion of the differences among schools around issues of equity:

- Student achievement on tests
- Student progress from one year to the next on tests
- School admissions of students with special needs
- Academic progress of students with special needs
- Student attendance rates
- Ability to retain students rather than expelling, suspending, or having students drop out.



# Commitment 7

RSD charter and direct-run schools will increase the percentage of students retained from one school year to the next.

Educating kids means keeping them in school. By publicly listing in Equity Reports the degree to which schools keep their students—rather than expelling them, suspending them, or watching them drop out—the RSD will focus our schools on this important issue. Schools will need support in doing this. So the RSD will use a “dollar-follows-the-child” approach, eliminating required alternative school payments to schools, and asking schools to fund alternative school services only when a child is expelled. For those who have been expelled, incarcerated, or otherwise placed at-risk, the RSD will solicit proposals for a new open-enrollment charter school premised on restorative justice and close mentoring relationships with students. Finally, for students returning from juvenile justice centers, newly created Parent-Family Centers will work with social service agencies to place and support students in the best schools for their success.



## Commitments to Community

What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

It will take informed communities insisting on change for children.

Task forces discussed at length issues of decision-making, insisting that the 100 Days discussion of RSD future plans not stop on the 100th day.

- When task force members considered community, two common priorities emerged. The first regarded RSD communication to parents, students, and school administrators. This included information about school performance, school closures, school transformations, and identification of new school operators. Task force members almost universally urged the RSD to find new and more ways to get the word out and to make processes participatory.
- Task force members also recommended that the RSD design new decision-making processes and clearly explain how these processes, such as revisions to the Facilities Master Plan and the upcoming new charter school operator selection process, will authentically include community input. Each task force stressed the importance of genuine community involvement in the district’s future work, especially regarding decisions that have lasting impacts on particular communities.

## Commitment 8

The RSD will make it easier for parents and community members to get information, get questions answered, and get issues resolved.

Superintendent White created Parent-Family Centers in four communities – Algiers, Desire, Central City, and New Orleans East – to make sure that on any school day, parents and community members can get their questions answered or enroll their children in a school. The RSD will take the following steps to improve regular communication with parents and community:

- Provide Spanish and Vietnamese translation specialists, with telephone connectivity to any Parent Center.
- Host Monthly Parent-Community Discussions, in rotating locations across the city, coordinated by parent volunteers, to review progress and resolve issues.
- Continue the Student Task Force, with scheduled committee and public meetings.
- Establish a hotline that connects to Parent Centers for issue resolution.
- Create a RSD Facebook page for expedient information sharing.

## Commitment 9

In 2011–2012, the RSD will make critical decisions regarding school transformations, school locations, building usage, and school closure through public processes and public input.

The RSD is about achieving excellence for children, and often this means changing the way adults do their work. This is a difficult issue, and it involves difficult discussions, but that is all the more reason to make public decisions in public, sharing rationale for decisions and hearing both support and criticism. The RSD school transformation timeline, on the next page, involves seven months (August – February) of discussions with families and community members whose schools are moving, transforming through new management, or closing. In the end, we may not agree on all decisions, but we should all contribute to the decision.



# Timeline for Transition & Siting

## August 2011

- Application to operate new charter schools are due.
- State of our Schools letters and meetings inform parents of potential change in operator of their school due to under performance.

## September 2011

- Public release of criteria for which schools will transition, and how they will be matched with charter operators.
- RSD takes into consideration input from State of our Schools meetings.

## October 2011

- RSD announces schools available for transition to new charter operators.
- Follow-up meetings are held at each announced site to answer parent questions about hear concerns

## November 2011

- Criteria for deciding the long-term site of schools that are not changing operators are released.
- Community sessions are held at transition sites to discuss parents' vision for the school.

## December 2011

- BESE names newly approved charters.
- i3 winners announced.
- Long-term site assignments for all schools except transition candidates announced.

## January 2012

- Newly approved charter organizations meet with communities to incorporate parents' vision for the school.
- Charter organizations prepare final proposals for communities.

## February 2012

- Communities' feedback on potential charter operators provided to the RSD.
- Matching and long-term site assignments for new and transition operators announced.

## March 2012

- New operators meet with current school leaders and communities to plan for the transition.
- Common application for student enrollment is released.

## April 2012

- Common application for student enrollment is due.
- The request for new applications to operate charter schools is released for the following year.



## Commitment 10

Schools in temporary homes or trailers will have a long-term home identified by the end of the 2011 calendar year.

New Orleans is undertaking the nation's most ambitious school rebuilding effort. That means great things for our children's future. But it also can mean confusion in the present, as schools buildings move and school organizations reside in temporary facilities. We owe our students clear plans for their schools' homes as soon as possible, and if we make decisions alongside communities, we can come to a good answer in short order. All current schools that will operate next year and in years hence will have a long-term school facility identified by the end of the 2011 calendar year.

## Commitment 11

The Facilities Master Plan will serve all New Orleans public school children in a new, renovated or refurbished facility.

The unprecedented investment in new school buildings is an opportunity for every child to go to school in a safe, healthy building, every day of the year. Previous iterations of the Facilities Master Plan rightly have focused on ensuring every building had all that it needed in order to educate children for the 21st century. Through leveraging additional funding, seeking greater efficiency in new construction, and making smart investments in current facilities, the Facilities Master Plan can ensure that every New Orleans public school child attends a new or refurbished building.

## Commitment 12

Through aggressive monitoring and adjustments in policy, the RSD will maximize the number of local businesses and employees working on the next round of school construction and renovation projects.

The Facilities Master Plan is about children first, and great schools are the best economic engine for our region. At the same time, children need employed parents and vibrant communities, along with great schools. RSD officials will mandate that contractors report clearly how well they hit Disadvantaged Business Enterprise goals and will require that they employ in-state residents, per the laws of our state.

# Conclusion



What will it take to get every student in New Orleans on track to graduate from college or to attain a professional career?

Schools in New Orleans have moved dramatically closer to answering this question over the past five years. More New Orleans public school students are on track to the adult lives they deserve because educators and parents are empowered to do what is best for their children.

New Orleans now has a chance to make this a lasting promise to all of its children. But the city will only see that day if it maintains a focus on excellence, ensures equity for all children, and allows community voice to inform the change.

*What Will it Take?* is a set of commitments from the RSD to the City of New Orleans. It represents hours of presenting, listening, discussing, debating, and reflecting with community members as diverse and varied as the city itself.

That discussion should not stop. The RSD will convene rotating discussions across the city to update families and communities on the work at hand. Whether community member, educator, parent, or student – please join these conversations and hold the RSD accountable for delivering on its commitments.



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