

School Turnaround in New Orleans: ReNEW Schools

OVERVIEW

ReNEW Schools (“ReNEW”) is a charter management organization that operates five schools serving 2,200 students in New Orleans, Louisiana. As a turnaround school operator, the organization’s mission is to transform academically unacceptable K-8 schools into rigorous college preparatory schools through high expectations for all students, exceptional teaching and leadership, and a strong academic program that is research-based and data-driven.

ReNEW’s model is based on nine characteristics of high-performing “no excuses” schools operated in New Orleans and other regions nationally. Specifically, the organization:

1. Expects all students to exceed the highest academic standards;
2. Recruits and empowers outstanding teaching professionals;
3. Teaches with curricula and instructional models that have proven results;
4. Maintains commitment to differentiation;
5. Assesses and analyzes data regularly to ensure that every student achieves academically;
6. Extends learning time to ensure student mastery;
7. Establishes a structured and orderly learning environment;
8. Engages families in support of student achievement; and,
9. Develops student character, leadership capacity, and community responsibility.

School Turnaround in New Orleans

ReNEW schools was founded in 2010 by Chief Executive Officer Gary Robichaux, a 23-year veteran of Louisiana public schools and a key leader in the transformation of the New Orleans School district following the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The redevelopment of New Orleans’s public schools was already beginning prior to the widespread destruction of the storms in the late summer of 2005. Many of the city’s schools were under state receivership, having been placed into the newly created statewide Recovery School District (RSD) following years of dismal test scores and a New Orleans Public School Board corruption scandal. When the hurricanes hit, work was underway to reform district management (the state had brought in a prominent firm, Alvarez and Marsal, to lead the work) as well as to attract new charter school leaders to create better options for the students in the city.

Robichaux was one of these new charter leaders. Having worked as a high school teacher and a Louisiana State Distinguished Educator, he was in the process of opening a new KIPP school in the city when the

QUICK FACTS

- **SCHOOL TYPE:** Charter school management organization
- **NUMBER OF SCHOOLS:** 5 schools in 2011-2012; Plans to grow to 10 schools by 2014-2015
- **GRADES:** PK-8 (Also runs Alternative high schools)
- **SIZE:** ~450 students per K-8 school at scale
- **DEMOGRAPHICS:** ~94% of students are low income; ~98% of students are minority
- **LOCATION:** New Orleans, LA
- **GENERAL ED FUNDING LEVEL:** \$7,298 per pupil
- **STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO:** ~25:1
- **STUDENT TO STAFF RATIO:** ~11.5:1
- **SCHOOL DAY/YEAR:** 197 DAYS, 8AM – 4:30PM
- **AVERAGE CORE CLASS SIZE:** 25

hurricanes hit and the levees broke, forcing the population of New Orleans to flee and leaving the public infrastructure in ruins.

Robichaux was evacuated to Houston. There, he convinced KIPP's senior leadership to allow him to open a school for displaced students (many of whom were from his newly opened school, but also many who weren't). New Orleans West (NOW) opened in October and served over 400 children displaced by the storm.¹ By the end of the 2005-06 school year, these students had among the highest levels of achievement of all displaced children in Texas.² Robichaux returned to New Orleans in the fall of 2006 and opened another KIPP school, McDonough 15, to serve returning students and families.

McDonough 15 was one of many new charter schools opening across the city as part of the post-hurricane reforms. During the yearlong public school closure, the RSD was given control of the remaining underperforming schools in the city—the vast majority. There was extreme damage to most facilities, as well as a dearth of teachers and leaders to serve in them. Further, the teacher's union lost collective bargaining rights after the storm.

In all of this chaos, the state leadership saw opportunity for radical change. The RSD leadership decided to charter as many schools as possible to both fill the gap in available seats as well as bring new high-performing models to the city. "We used Katrina as an opportunity to build—not rebuild, but build—a new school system," says Paul Vallas, the RSD's first superintendent following the storm and the architect of the system strategy, which was to create an "overwhelmingly publicly funded, predominantly privately run school system."³ In order to support the new charter efforts, leadership—in partnership with a new school support organization called New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO)—also worked to bring a number of other education organizations like Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), and the Achievement Network.

McDonough 15 quickly became one of the highest-performing schools in the district, and Robichaux was tapped by Vallas to lead the development of RSD-run (non-charter) K-8 schools. Under his leadership, these schools' state accountability performance scores doubled over two years. Given his success, Vallas encouraged Robichaux to start a new independent charter school organization that could both turn around some of the district's lowest-performing schools as well as help the RSD to get out of the "business of running schools on a day-to-day basis."⁴

Robichaux left the RSD, and with support from it and New Schools for New Orleans (who provided a grant for start-up expenses) founded ReNEW. Talking about the ReNEW approach and partnership with the RSD, Vallas noted, "these changes reflect the continuing evolution of the RSD as we build a system of high-quality schools that are based on best practices. [...] While our schools have all made progress, some are not improving fast enough. We are bringing in strong models with these schools to take them to the next level."⁵

¹ Kerry A. Dolan, "Katrina's Surprise," *Forbes*, August 13, 2007 (<http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2007/0813/096.html>).

² Jennifer Radcliffe, "Katrina Aftermath: After Gary Robichaux's new charter school in New Orleans was washed away, he came to Houston and started again," *Houston Chronicle*, June 3, 2006.

³ Sarah Laskow, "Necessity Is the Mother of Invention," *Newsweek*, August 26, 2010 (<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/26/new-orleans-s-charter-school-revolution.html>).

⁴ Sarah Carr, "Nonprofit to focus on failing New Orleans public schools," *The Times Picayune*, May 10, 2009 (http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/05/nonprofit_to_focus_on_failing.html).

⁵ RSD LA Press Release, February 22, 2011, "Recovery District Announces School Changes for 2011-12 Academic Year," <http://206.218.181.50/Media/PressRelease.aspx?PR=1507>.

The RSD selected ReNEW to take over two schools in the fall of 2010-11. Under the takeover model, ReNEW encouraged all existing students in the building to remain, and additional students were accepted via lottery. Schools opened fully enrolled, with an average student-body size of 450. While pre-takeover staff members were encouraged to reapply, generally fewer than 15 percent were asked to stay on.

TURNAROUND PROGRAM RESULTS TO DATE

ReNEW sees its work as part of a larger district transformation. Formed collaboratively with the RSD and New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), the organization hopes to play a major role in eliminating “academically unacceptable” schools from the city by taking on failing schools until none are left.

The need for organizations such as ReNEW to take on failing schools was driven by concerns that unless the city’s schools improve quickly, the opportunities born out of the devastation of the hurricanes will disappear. Having worked for KIPP, the district, and the state, Robichaux believes in the potential of the new system: “I hope someone doesn’t end up controlling the schools and we go back to the old way... that’s my biggest fear, that we go back to the old way.”⁶

ReNEW currently operates five schools. In its first year of operation, 2010-2011, ReNEW took over two K-8 RSD-run schools, Live Oak Elementary and Laurel Elementary (the campuses were renamed to SciTech Academy and Batiste Arts Academy). Under ReNEW’s operation, these schools showed some of the highest academic gains of all open enrollment schools in the city. At Batiste, only 15 percent of enrolled students could read at grade level at the time of ReNEW’s takeover. By the end of the first school year, Robichaux and his staff had nearly tripled that number to 43 percent. The staff is hoping that 75 percent of all students will read at grade level by the end of the turnaround’s second year (2011-2012).⁷

In the 2011-12 year, ReNEW was selected to takeover one more elementary school, Reed Elementary (a school where in the 2009-2010 school year, a teacher shackled a first grader to a chair⁸). The organization also decided to open two small alternative, “accelerated” high schools (the City Park and West Bank campuses) to serve students who are at risk for dropping out, or under-credited. These schools serve students aged 15 to 21, and by operating year-round offer these students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma in two years.

ReNEW plans to add five more schools over the next three school years, growing to serve 10 percent of the New Orleans student population. After five years of operation, and assuming all schools in New Orleans have been rated academically acceptable under the state’s accountability system, the organization will consider opening schools in Louisiana or other southern regions.

⁶ Cindy Chang, “Katrina rewrites the book on education in New Orleans,” *The Times-Picayune*, August 26, 2010 (http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2010/08/hurricane_katrina_swept_away_y.html)

⁷ J. Hale, “School with dismal record revamps teaching style,” Fox News 8, August 7, 2011 (http://www.fox8live.com/news/local/story/School-with-dismal-record-revamps-teaching-style/j0dxN12EBU6NMA_5GTEOQ.csp).

⁸ B. Mock, *Handcuffing 6-Year-Olds in New Orleans? Seriously?* The Root, July 9, 2010, <http://www.theroot.com/views/nola-child-handcuffs>.

	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Schools	2	5	6	8	10
Grades	K-8	K-12	K-12	K-12	K-12
Students	1250	2200	3100	4000	5000

Robichaux believes that ReNEW can accomplish these goals, in part because of the freedoms his organization can have in New Orleans. “It took a hurricane to speed up and really jump-start the reform efforts in New Orleans. Before, we were tied up in what became a complex bureaucracy. Now we have the autonomy to do what we need to get done to make our schools successful.”⁹ Given this, throughout the expansion process, Robichaux is keenly focused on trying to not replicate the inefficient bureaucratic traits he saw in the school system before the storm: “We’re going to try to grow [...] but hopefully avoid those problems.”¹⁰

SCHOOL TURNAROUND ELEMENTS

Teacher collaboration and professional development. ReNEW considers teacher planning and collaboration time essential to making sure “teachers are well-equipped to execute exciting, relevant, and effective lessons each day.” Given this, the organization allots extensive resources (including 450 minutes per week during the school year) to planning and professional development. Teachers participate in three weeks of guided curriculum training during the summer, and each teacher gets one block of planning daily in subject or grade-level cluster team meetings. Friday planning blocks are spent in grade-level teams for school-wide professional development to help increase common knowledge consistency across the staff. All faculty members are expected to observe at another high-performing school in the city at least one time per year.

This planning time is paired with intensive support from school and central office instructional leadership. Leaders conduct informal observations once a week, and teachers turn in lesson plans weekly for feedback and review. The organization uses the Teacher Advancement Project (“TAP”) as the basis for formal reviews and development, and teachers receive at least three formal observations per year under that program.

In order to find and recruit teachers and leaders who will thrive in this type of environment, ReNEW leverages recruitment partnerships with organizations such as TeachNOLA (an initiative of TNTP), New Leaders for New Schools, Teach for America, and local schools of education.

Resetting schools by instituting a defined school culture of high expectations. ReNEW seeks to create a “no excuses” culture that motivates all children to achieve at high levels. The culture, in which the role of adults is to “inundate” every child with a belief that he or she can succeed no matter what, is embodied through five core “RENEW” values that are woven through systems, rituals, routines, and processes. These values are: Respect, Enthusiasm, No Excuses, Excellence, and Work Hard.

This culture is expected to be enacted and supported by all adults in the building. Each turnaround school is broken into three small schools (K-2, 3-5, 6-8), each led by its own leader. These leaders work collaboratively to manage the whole school in conjunction with central office staff. Two deans support these leaders in making sure culture is consistent across the small schools.

⁹ Andrea Cates, *ReNew Schools Volunteer Project – Reinventing Education*, DMAI Connections, June 21, 2011, <http://mydmai.destinationmarketing.org/p/bl/et/blogid=5&blogaid=455>

¹⁰ Laskow, “Necessity Is the Mother of Invention.”

At the beginning of the school turnaround efforts, all students participate in a three-day summer student orientation to introduce them to and inculcate them into the new culture. As one Batiste eighth grader noted, the culture at her new school is decidedly different now that ReNEW is in charge: “My old school was a fighting environment. We couldn't go anywhere. We couldn't get anything done.”¹¹

Behavioral expectations are clear and consistent across classrooms, with a “sweat-the-small-stuff” emphasis and common practices like silent lines for transitions, a strict “no-hall-passes” policy, and structured restroom time. (One reporter described the new approach as a “boot camp–like atmosphere.”¹²)

Academically, all ReNEW schools have a college expectation for all students. ReNEW has articulated a goal that all of its students will be able to take advantage of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), which assists them with college tuition. As part of this, every student will master algebra by the end of 8th grade and study a second language. Classrooms are named after higher education institutions chosen by students. Further, students are graded on an “A, B, C, or Incomplete” system; failure is simply not an option. This expectation is welcome but novel: “I got really excited, but to be honest, I wasn't interested in college until I came here,” said one Batiste student.¹³

Finally, ReNEW makes a point of rewarding student progress and positive behaviors through a point system, celebrations, and “badges” that students earn. “They inspire you to get better,” noted one. “If you don't get them, you get mad. I didn't get all of them. I only got two this year. But that just makes me aspire to get more.”¹⁴

Common classroom structures and lesson design. As the organization states on its website, its “instructional approach is not rooted in experimentation with respect to curriculum and pedagogy. Rather, the school will implement an instructional program that is informed by successful practices of high-performing urban public schools, and that allows for creative teacher adaptation and improvement tied to measurable outcomes.” Given this, ReNEW seeks to create instructional consistency across classrooms.

All teachers are expected to engage students uniformly, executing a clearly articulated instructional approach based on practices from other “no excuses” schools. They utilize common blackboard configurations, direct-instruction lesson structures that follow an “I-We-You” format, and a spiraling curriculum that emphasizes systematic standards review, where teachers are expected to review past standards through “do nows” and homework. All teachers also implement the ReNEW “FOCUS” (Face the speaker, On task always, Character, Use hand before speaking, Sit up straight) rules to guide student behavior in classes.

While teachers have some autonomy over how to cover the standards outlined in the schools’ scope and sequences, they are strongly encouraged to share and pull lessons from top schools and a suite of approved curricula. Teachers must create daily and long-term plans, as well as a professional portfolio that is available for review at all times.

¹¹ Hale, “School with dismal record revamps teaching style.”

¹² Chang, “Katrina rewrites the book on education in New Orleans.”

¹³ Hale, “School with dismal record revamps teaching style.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

Focus on data and outcomes to drive all decision-making. ReNEW leadership believes that schools too often focus on education inputs rather than student outputs. The organization therefore creates clearly stated annual goals attached to specific measurable targets—including teacher retention, attendance, LEAP (the Louisiana state exam) results, student retention, and family satisfaction—and fanatically measures progress against goals. Each school has its own dedicated data manager, and school leaders meet with ReNEW’s Chief Academic Officer every six weeks to review data and discuss progress against them.

The ReNEW turnaround schools’ academic and operational goals are provided below:

Academic Measure	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Attendance	95%	95%	96%	97%	97%
% Students Basic or Above Math	60%	70%	80%	90%	90%
% Students Basic or Above ELA	60%	70%	80%	90%	90%
% Students Basic or Above Science	60%	70%	80%	90%	90%
% Students Basic or Above Social St.	60%	70%	80%	90%	90%
SPS (Louisiana Performance Index) Score	80	90	100	110	120
Meet AYP Goals Annually					
Operational Measure					
Successful Audit in Each Year of Operation					
Positive Fund Balance in Each Year of Operation					
All Financial Reports Submitted in Timely Manner					

In order to track progress against goals, all ReNEW schools share common scope and sequence assessments modeled after the state assessment format. (The organization partners with a national interim assessment provider called the Achievement Network that works with a number of other schools within New Orleans.) Assessments are given every six weeks, and proficiency-based report cards are sent home to parents following each assessment cycle.

Given ReNEW’s adoption of the TAP teacher development framework, the organization uses value-added data to assess teacher effectiveness. These data are used to drive teacher retention and development protocols. Finally, all schools utilize a common Edusoft-based data system, and remote student response systems are installed at every classroom desk.

Partnerships for enrichment and capacity-building. ReNEW engages a variety of community leaders and partnerships to provide student enrichment for 90 minutes each day. The student enrichment depends on

location. For example, at Batiste Cultural Arts Academy, the school's namesake family sponsors and teaches a cultural arts program.¹⁵ At SciTech, students are offered science, technology, engineering, and math opportunities. City Year corps members are also on site at schools to offer student tutoring and remediation. The ReNEW home office also receives support from local organizations, like NSNO. NSNO provides the ReNEW Board with five days of governance training.

Additional time and individual attention in core academic subjects for all students. As the ReNEW leadership notes in charter application materials, “We make more time for students because they require it in order to be sufficiently prepared to thrive in selective colleges and universities.” Given this, ReNEW has adopted a year-round model, with a shortened summer break of six weeks,¹⁶ and offers additional time each day.

The organization operates a 197-day school year, with school days running from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This means that ReNEW students receive 90 more minutes of instruction daily, and attend 20 additional days of school per year. In addition, the school offers after-school, Saturday, and holiday intervention hours for students who are behind. Students receive 90 minutes of reading, 90 minutes of English Language Arts, and 90 minutes of math each day, with additional time embedded for extracurricular activities, tutoring, and homework support.

Most of ReNEW's students are years behind where they should be. As Batiste teacher Glenda Poole reported, “I have 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds in class and many of them are on a 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade level.”¹⁷ The schools focus on accelerating skills and learning through intensive remediation in core subjects.

The school creates individualized learning plans for all students. ReNEW also explicitly focuses on basic literacy in all subjects, going back to the “roots” of reading. “Teachers, leaders, deans, and everyone are teaching reading,” Robichaux said. “We can't see gains in math, science, and social studies until the kids can read on level.”¹⁸ Utilizing a balanced literacy framework, teachers provide direct scripted instruction as well as literacy circles, learning centers, and readers'/writers' workshop. Students work in flexible groupings, but also have “learning buddies”—students of a different reading or numeracy level who can help provide support.

This student support extends beyond the boundaries of the school day, as teachers are expected to provide their phone numbers for after-hours questions and help. And students aren't hesitant to reach out. “I call them multiple times. I've called three times a night. I mostly call my English Language Arts and my science teacher,” noted one.¹⁹

Family and community engagement. ReNEW sees family engagement as a primary lever for academic achievement. Prior to takeover, ReNEW's staff makes a concerted effort to reach out to every family, explaining the changes that the organization will make, and asking them to remain at the school (85 percent do²⁰). At the beginning for every school year, staff make home visits to all families and ask parents and

¹⁵ Hale, “School with dismal record revamps teaching style.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hale, “School with dismal record revamps teaching style.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

guardians to sign family “accountability agreements” that outline mutual commitments, including attendance at mandatory quarterly progress meetings.

Parents may participate in school governance via an involvement committee. All schools operate with an “open door policy”; any parent may visit the school to observe or meet with staff at any time. Further, all parents and guardians are provided with teacher cellular phone numbers so they may contact key staff as needed.

Centralized monitoring and support mechanisms. ReNEW sees the role of its school leaders as primarily instructional. Given this, the organization provides centralized services from its back office in order to take away the majority of schools’ operational and compliance issues. In addition, ReNEW staffs each school with a dedicated operations manager to assist leaders. This approach, ReNEW believes, gives its leaders and teachers more time and autonomy to run academically and culturally rich schools where the focus is on teaching and learning.

FUNDING

General education funding for New Orleans’s charter schools is \$7,300 per student (55 percent of which is local funding). Given that many of ReNEW’s students are low-income and/or have special needs, the organization also receives an additional \$1.3 million in federal aid per school. As a management organization, ReNEW receives a management fee from schools in exchange for the provision of centralized services and supports.

While ReNEW seeks to fund all of its operating costs on ongoing public revenues, the organization required an additional \$1 million in philanthropic dollars to cover start-up and central office capacity-building. The organization has received start-up support from the NewSchools Venture Fund as well as Walton Foundation charter start-up grants (\$500,000 per school over two years). ReNEW hopes to be sustainable with 3,000 students.²¹

SOURCES

In addition to footnoted sources, information in this case study is drawn from the ReNEW Schools website, www.renewschools.org, and the organization’s 2011 charter application.

²¹ Chang, “Katrina rewrites the book on education in New Orleans.”

APPENDICES

SAMPLE SCHOOL SCHEDULE

Period	Subject/Activity
8:00 – 8:10 am	Homework Check
8:10 – 9:40 am	1 st Block, Reading
9:40 – 11:10 am	2 nd Block, Math
11:10 am – 12:45 pm	3 rd Block, English Language Arts
12:45 – 1:20 pm	Lunch/Recess
1:20 – 2:50 pm	4 th Block, Science or Social Studies
2:50 – 4:20 pm	5 th Block, Enrichment (with optional 45 minutes remediation time)
4:20 – 4:30 pm	Homework Review

SCHOOL STAFFING & BUDGET

(K-8: 9 grades, 50 students per grade)

Leadership: 3 (\$85K)

Deans: 2 (\$47K)

Classroom teachers: 18 (\$47K)

Teacher Interns: 5 (\$37K)

Special Ed Teacher: 3 (\$47K)

Special Ed Intern: 3 (\$37K)

Social Worker: .5 (\$27.5K)

Nurse: .5 (\$27.5K)

Operations Manager: 1 (\$50K)

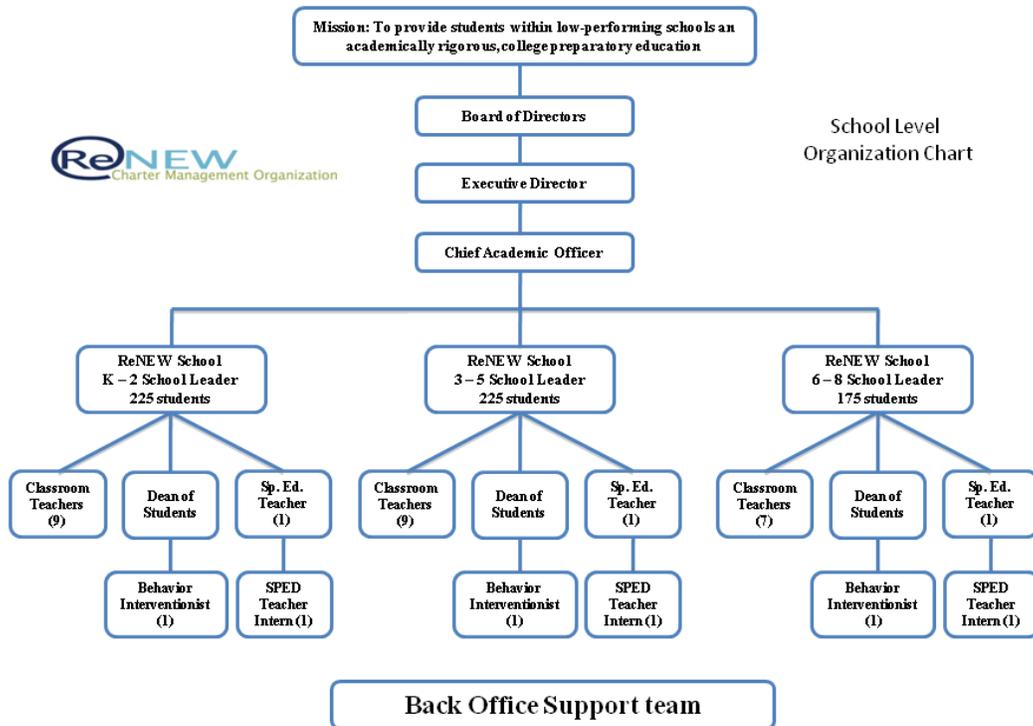
Data Manager: 1 (\$50K)

Clerk: 1.5 (\$30K)

Total staff= 38.5

In addition to the staff salaries listed above (which are based on those paid in RSD-run schools), ReNEW also hires part-time enrichment and remediation instructors at a cost of approximately \$400,000 per school.

School Organizational Chart



ReNEW Central Office Org Chart

