



New Orleans Schools FAQs

New Orleans' system of schools provides parents with choices from a diverse group of free, public, open-enrollment schools for their children. These schools have the autonomy to innovate and tailor their model to their students, but are held accountable to rigorous standards for their operations, progress and performance.

Below, find answers to frequently asked questions about New Orleans public schools and the New Orleans education landscape.

Public Schools in New Orleans

1. What does it mean for a school to be a New Orleans charter school, and how are they different from charter schools in other places across the U.S.?

Public: New Orleans charter schools are public schools, as are all charter schools nationally. They are tuition-free, and they must serve all students in accordance with state and federal laws, including students with disabilities, students who are homeless, and students who are English Language Learners. They are also held to the same state accountability standards as traditional public schools in Louisiana.

Nonprofit: All New Orleans charter schools are operated by nonprofit charter organizations which are governed by community-based, volunteer boards of directors. Louisiana state law does not allow for-profit entities to hold charter school contracts. In addition, there are not any New Orleans charter schools that use for-profit education management organizations, which provide "whole-school operation" services to a small percentage of other charter schools in the U.S.

Local: Per Louisiana law, all New Orleans charter schools are governed by community-based nonprofit boards of directors. These boards must include at least one member who is an alumnus of the school or a parent/guardian of a current student, and must be representative of the New Orleans community in terms of race and gender. In addition, 90% of New Orleans charter schools are operated by nonprofit charter organizations that were founded locally.

Equitable enrollment: For the vast majority of New Orleans charter schools (95%), the processes for application, admissions, transfers, and readmissions are centrally managed through [NOLA Public Schools'](#) unified enrollment system, called [EnrollNOLA](#). While admissions at most charter schools across the country are managed internally and thus have less oversight, in New Orleans the unified system ensures that school enrollment is equitable and transparent for all students and families.

Filling open seats: The 95% of New Orleans charter schools that participate in EnrollNOLA are required to accept new students when they have open seats in *any* grade, both between school years and during the school year (this is sometimes referred to as [backfilling](#)). While charter schools in some states do not accept new students past their entry grade (e.g., kindergarten or 9th grade), in New Orleans we believe that accepting new students



at all grade levels is critical for equity, in order to provide families that are new to the district or that desire a transfer with as many school options as possible.

Equitable expulsion policy: Similar to the unified enrollment system, expulsion referrals from all New Orleans charter schools are centrally managed by NOLA Public Schools' [Student Hearing Office](#) (SHO). All schools must also adhere to the SHO's common expulsion policy. While discipline policies and systems at most charter schools across the country are solely internal and thus have less oversight, in New Orleans the SHO ensures that students and families are treated equitably across all schools.

2. Are New Orleans charter schools really public schools?

Yes, New Orleans charter schools are public schools. They are tuition-free, and they must serve all students in accordance with state and federal laws, including students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, students who are homeless, and students who are in foster care.

In addition, like all other Louisiana public schools, New Orleans charter schools must:

- Administer state standardized tests, evaluate teachers, and receive School Performance Scores through the state public school accountability system; and
- Comply with Louisiana state laws that govern public entities, such as the Code of Ethics, Open Meetings Law, Public Records Act, Public Bid Law, and Local Government Budget Act.

3. Are all public schools in New Orleans charter schools?

Yes, essentially all public schools in New Orleans are charter schools, and 99% of New Orleans public school students attend charter schools. 83 of the [86 public schools](#) in New Orleans during the 2019-20 school year are charter schools. 3 schools are small, specialized programs operated through contracts between NOLA Public Schools and nonprofit organizations.

4. Are New Orleans charter schools open to all children?

87% of New Orleans charter schools are "open-enrollment," meaning they have no admissions criteria and are open to all children living in New Orleans.

8% of New Orleans charter schools have some form of admissions criteria related to their respective academic models, such as exams or auditions. Half of these schools have admissions criteria for all grade levels. The other half are open-enrollment in lower elementary grades and only have admissions criteria in upper grades; for example, a language immersion school that is open-enrollment in grades K-2 but requires a language proficiency exam for grades 3-8. The remaining 5% of New Orleans charters are alternative schools for students who have fallen significantly behind in credit requirements or who are serving expulsion terms.

Regardless of admissions criteria, *all* New Orleans charter schools are required to follow Louisiana state and federal laws related to serving students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, students who are homeless, and students in foster care.



5. How are New Orleans charter schools different than traditional, district-operated schools?

While charter schools and traditional district schools are all public schools, there are differences between them. Charter schools are independently run, meaning they are not operated by a traditional public school district; instead they operate under an independent contract or “charter” between an authorizing agency and a charter organization. In New Orleans, all charter organizations are governed by nonprofit community boards, and the two authorizing agencies — the [Orleans Parish School Board](#) (OPSB) and the [Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) (BESE) — are boards with elected members.

In addition to governance, New Orleans charter schools are different from traditional district schools in three primary ways:

- **Choice:** All New Orleans families choose which school(s) they want their child(ren) to attend, instead of being assigned to a school based on where they live. Teachers, principals, and support staff also choose the school for which they want to work, instead of being assigned to a school by a school district central office.
- **Autonomy:** Charter schools operate with freedom from some of the policies and regulations that are imposed upon traditional district schools. This means that most decisions about how New Orleans schools are run are made by those closest to the students - principals, teachers, and charter networks - instead of district administrators at a central office. New Orleans charter schools are able to make timely decisions in order to best meet the needs of their students in many areas such as instruction, staffing, budget, and school day and school year schedules. In order to ensure equity, however, there are some areas in which New Orleans schools do not have autonomy, such as enrollment and expulsions.
- **Accountability:** New Orleans charter schools participate in the same [academic accountability system](#) as traditional district schools in Louisiana, but they are also held to standards concerning financial management and organizational stability. Furthermore, unlike traditional schools, New Orleans charter schools that persistently fail to meet expectations are not allowed to continue operating; their authorizing agency, OPSB or BESE, will not renew their charter contract. Accountability standards are set forth in Louisiana state [law](#) and [policy](#) and established by the charter’s authorizing agency (OPSB’s [Accountability Framework](#) and BESE’s [Performance Compact](#)).

6. Are all New Orleans charters schools the same?

No, New Orleans charter schools vary in a number of different ways. Our system is based on choice, meaning that families can select a school anywhere in the city that is the right fit for their student’s needs, interests, and learning preferences. The following list includes just some of the ways in which our charter schools differ.

- Every charter organization in New Orleans has its own philosophy and approach to instruction and school culture. For example, some schools have a particular content focus, such as STEM, the arts, or the classics. Some schools use a non-traditional approach to instruction, such as project-based learning, the Montessori Method, or blended learning. Our system also includes language immersion and bilingual programs, International Baccalaureate schools, and more.
- Some New Orleans charter schools were opened as brand new schools, while others are former traditional district schools that were converted into charter schools.



- Some New Orleans charter schools are part of a network - a nonprofit charter organization that operates multiple schools with a common philosophy. Other New Orleans charter schools are “single-site,” meaning they are the only school operated by their nonprofit charter organization. (See Question #3 in the second section for further information).

7. Who runs charter schools in New Orleans?

Charter schools are independently run, meaning they are not operated by a traditional public school district. Instead, they operate under an independent contract - or “charter” - between an authorizing agency and a charter organization (see Question #8 for further information about charter authorization).

All New Orleans charter schools are operated by nonprofit charter organizations. Almost all of these charter organizations - 43 out of [45 total](#) - were founded locally; 90% of New Orleans charter schools are operated by the 43 local organizations. Homegrown or not, all New Orleans charter organizations are governed by community-based nonprofit boards of directors, in accordance with Louisiana law. These boards must include at least one member who is an alumnus of the school or a parent/guardian of a current student, and must be representative of the New Orleans community in terms of race and gender. In addition, there are not any New Orleans charter schools that use for-profit education management organizations, which provide “whole-school operation” services to a small percentage of other charter schools in the U.S.

Some of the nonprofit charter organizations in New Orleans operate one school only, while others operate multiple schools. The latter type of organizations are referred to as charter networks or charter management organizations (CMOs). As of the 2019-20 school year, two thirds of New Orleans schools are part of a network, and one third are “single-site.” (See Question #3 in the second section for further information.)

While New Orleans charter schools are operated independently by nonprofit charter organizations and their corresponding boards of directors, their performance is still monitored and held accountable by government agencies - most by the local public school board, the [Orleans Parish School Board](#) (OPSB), and some by the state school board, the [Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education](#). (See Questions #8-9 for further information.)

8. Who decides which charter schools can open in New Orleans?

Entities that are able to authorize charter schools - to decide who can open and run charter schools - are called authorizing agencies, or simply authorizers. In New Orleans, the only authorizing agencies are the local public school board, the [Orleans Parish School Board](#) (OPSB), and the state school board, the [Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) (BESE). Thus, all New Orleans charter schools are authorized by a board with elected members. Other types of institutions that act as authorizers elsewhere in the U.S. - such as universities, municipalities, or nonprofit organizations - are not allowed to authorize charter schools in Louisiana due to state law.

9. Who oversees the charter schools in New Orleans? How are they held accountable?



Unlike most traditional district-operated schools, a charter school may be closed or turned over to a different charter organization if it persistently fails to meet academic, financial, and/or organizational performance standards. The agency that monitors a charter school's performance and decides whether it remains open is the same agency that authorized it, i.e. the agency that allowed it to open in the first place, and with which it holds a charter contract.

In New Orleans, the only authorizing agencies are the local public school board, the [Orleans Parish School Board](#) (OPSB), and the state school board, the [Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) (BESE). Thus, all New Orleans charter schools are overseen by a board with elected members. Both OPSB and BESE oversee their charter schools in accordance with Louisiana state [law](#) and [policy](#) as well as their own defined performance standards, which encompass student outcomes, financial management, and organizational stability. OPSB's performance standards are outlined in their [Charter School Accountability Framework](#), and BESE's standards are outlined in the [Louisiana Charter School Performance Compact](#).

While charter school performance standards in some parts of the U.S. have not consistently been enforced - meaning that under-performing charters have been allowed to continue operating for many years - New Orleans has ensured that only schools meeting our high bar have remained open. Since 2006, no New Orleans charter organization with a school performing below the academic standards outlined in its charter contract has been allowed to continue operating that school.

The New Orleans Landscape

1. Is there a local school district in New Orleans?

Yes, [NOLA Public Schools](#) (NOLA-PS) is the local public school district in New Orleans. However, NOLA-PS does not directly operate any schools; the vast majority of schools under its purview are charter schools. There are also a few small, specialized programs called "contract schools" which are operated through contracts between NOLA-PS and nonprofit organizations. NOLA Public Schools is governed by the local public school board, the [Orleans Parish School Board](#).

2. How do New Orleans students enroll in public school?

The New Orleans system of public schools operates under city-wide school choice and unified enrollment.

City-wide public school choice: Unlike most traditional school districts, New Orleans public school students are not assigned to a school based on their residential address and the district's geographic attendance boundaries; no student has a "default" school of attendance. New Orleans students and families can apply to any public school in the city, regardless of their neighborhood or the school's location.

Unified enrollment: For the vast majority of New Orleans public schools (95%), the processes for application, admissions, transfers, and readmissions are centrally managed through [NOLA Public Schools'](#) unified enrollment system. This system, called [EnrollNOLA](#), ensures that public school enrollment is equitable and



transparent for all students and families. It also makes the school application process more convenient for families, as EnrollNOLA's OneApp enables families to apply to all participating schools using one application. A small number of New Orleans schools - 5% - do not participate in EnrollNOLA and instead manage their enrollment process independently; all of these schools have selective admissions criteria.

3. What are charter networks in New Orleans? What are charter management organizations (CMOs)?

Charter management organizations (CMOs), also referred to as charter school networks, are nonprofit organizations that operate more than one charter school. CMOs have a unified educational mission and typically provide shared instructional and operational services to all of their schools, such as professional development, benchmark assessments, student transportation, and human resources. As of the 2019-20 school year, two thirds of New Orleans schools are operated by CMOs. The remaining one third of schools are "single-site," meaning they are the only school operated by their nonprofit charter organization.

New Orleans CMOs differ in a variety of ways, just like New Orleans charter schools themselves. The majority of the CMOs in New Orleans - 16 out of [18 total](#) - were founded locally; the remaining 2 CMOs were founded in other states and operate charter schools across multiple states. Some of the locally founded CMOs focus on serving a single neighborhood within New Orleans, such as the West Bank or New Orleans East. Some New Orleans CMOs operate K-8 schools only or high schools only, while others operate schools spanning all grades. Some CMOs focus on a specific academic model or philosophy, such as the Montessori Method or alternative schools for students who have fallen significantly behind in credit requirements.

All New Orleans charter organizations, both CMO and single-site, are governed by community-based nonprofit boards of directors, in accordance with Louisiana law. These boards must include at least one member who is an alumnus of the school or a parent/guardian of a current student, and must be representative of the New Orleans community in terms of race and gender.

4. What is the Recovery School District? What is New Orleans schools "unification"?

The Recovery School District (RSD) is an arm of the Louisiana Department of Education that was created by the state legislature in 2003 to turn around the lowest performing schools across the state. The purpose of the RSD, both then and now, is to serve as the final intervention for schools that continue to struggle despite comprehensive improvement strategies.

While the RSD is a statewide intervention strategy, it is often associated with New Orleans due to the large number of New Orleans schools that were under RSD governance between 2005 and 2018. Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the state had transferred five chronically failing New Orleans schools into the RSD, although far more schools in the city were low-performing. As of the end of the 2004-05 school year, almost two thirds of New Orleans' 117 public schools were designated "Academically Unacceptable Schools" (AUS) by the state, and many more were labeled with "Academic Warning." After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the Louisiana Legislature and Department of Education decided to transfer all of the low-performing New Orleans schools to the RSD, leaving 10 high-performing schools under the local public school board, called the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). From 2005 until summer 2018, the RSD governed the majority of New Orleans public schools.



As of July 1, 2018, all New Orleans schools under the RSD returned to the oversight of the local school board OPSB (and the local public school district, [NOLA Public Schools](#)). This was a “unification” of almost all New Orleans public schools under local governance. (A small number of schools in the city are special state-authorized charter schools and were not affected.) This milestone was the culmination of efforts that were initiated in 2016, when the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 91 providing for unification, and dozens of New Orleans educators and community stakeholders subsequently began working together to develop and implement a transition plan. While all former RSD charter schools in New Orleans are now overseen by OPSB and NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS), this governance shift did not involve any changes for these schools related to mission, instruction, staffing, etc.; Act 91 preserved the foundations of the New Orleans system that have led to [immense improvement](#) since 2005 - family choice, equity, school-level autonomy, and charter school accountability.

To learn more about the Recovery School District in New Orleans, read the Cowen Institute’s 2011 report, [Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District](#). To learn more about unification, read New Schools for New Orleans’ July 2018 [blog post](#).

We would like to acknowledge the [Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools](#) for the contributions that their helpful materials provided to the information on this page.

MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about the New Orleans system and its schools.

Basic information:

- Data: [New Orleans by the Numbers](#)
- School profiles: [2019-20 New Orleans Public School Guide](#)
- Local school district: [NOLA Public Schools](#)

Articles, reports, and research:

- [Patrick Dobard: From Strong Accountability to Open Enrollment and Community Engagement, 10 Reasons New Orleans’ Schools Are Succeeding](#)
- [NSNO Blog: OneApp Ensures Equity as Schools Continue Working to Improve](#)
- [Cowen Institute: The State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2018](#)
- [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans](#)