



Everything New Orleans

Report criticizes Recovery School District's oversight

Published: Tuesday, September 20, 2011, 7:00 AM



By **Andrew Vanacore, The Times-Picayune**

The state's **Recovery School District** has failed to provide strict enough oversight of the charter schools it oversees in the areas of academics, finances and legal compliance, **according to a report released Monday** by state legislative auditor Daryl Purpera.



[View full size](#)

Ted Jackson, The Times-Picayune archive

These students at Abramson Science and Technology Charter School were photographed Aug. 10.

But the district nevertheless has made significant strides in boosting student performance and, contrary to claims made by many of its critics, is not getting more funding to do it than other districts around the state, the audit shows.

The report covers fiscal 2010, corresponding to the 2009-2010 school year. It faults the district, as well as the state's charter office, for lacking an effective way to monitor academic performance at charter schools whose students aren't old enough to take

standardized tests.

It also found that many charter schools were tardy in turning in the financial reports they are required to provide the RSD. And it criticizes the district for collecting and reviewing data on legal compliance only for schools whose charters were up for renewal that year. The district must make sure charters are complying with laws related to health and safety, special education needs, and other areas.

The audit comes at an important juncture for the RSD, which has responsibility for more than two-thirds of public school students in New Orleans. It provides a third-party checkup for a still-evolving district as the state's reform efforts come up for popular referendum with elections to the state board of education next month.

The RSD represents the state's vision for transforming public schools. The district has no locally elected school board questioning decisions by individual school leaders. And there are no union-negotiated contracts tying their hands.

Held more accountable

But in return for that autonomy, charter schools are supposed to face tighter accountability for the way they spend taxpayer dollars and the progress they make in improving outcomes for students.

The audit recommends heightening oversight in a number of areas, and the state department of education has agreed with all of its recommendations, outlining efforts already under way to improve its process.

One of those areas is the monitoring of academic gains at schools with younger pupils. Louisiana students don't start taking state exams until the third grade, but some schools open with only the lower grades and then build one grade at a time. In a response summarized within the audit report, the department said it is working with other states to find ways of assessing academic progress in grades K-2.

On finances, the audit outlined the various reports that charter schools must provide the state and pointed out that in many cases, charters handed them in after they were due. For instance, nearly three-quarters of charters turned in budget data after the deadline in fiscal 2010. And more than half were late on their annual financial reports, though in neither case did the audit turn up any significant problems with the numbers that were turned in. The audit recommends that the state continue to provide financial training for school administrators.

It also calls for more comprehensive monitoring of how charter schools are living up to the legal requirements placed on all public schools.

Annual reviews faulted

Auditors looked at factors including the percentage of students with disabilities; food and nutrition programs; and policies on enrollment, discipline and parental complaints. They faulted the district for not doing a more complete annual review of all charter schools. Instead, the audit notes, the RSD reviewed only those schools up for renewal with the state that year, or 10 of the total 48.

The state responded by pledging that "going forward, charter schools will receive annual monitoring site visits in which predetermined areas of performance will be evaluated."

The need for closer scrutiny came into sharp focus over the summer, after allegations surfaced about Abramson Science and Technology Charter School in eastern New Orleans. State records from more than a year ago showed that teachers and students had accused school administrators of various unethical policies, from cheating on science fair competitions to leaving classrooms unattended for weeks at a time. School

officials continue to deny those allegations, but the state board of education voted to revoke the school's charter after a state investigation.

John White, who took the reins as superintendent at the RSD in May, released a strategic plan earlier this month that calls for sending teams of educators into each of the district's charter schools on an annual basis to make sure they comply with rules on special education, enrollment, testing, safety and other areas.

Responsibility shifted

That approach will shift greater responsibility for oversight from Baton Rouge to the RSD, which is based in New Orleans.

Faults aside, the audit had nothing but praise for the academic gains the RSD has made.

The RSD is "making progress toward improving student performance based on multiple measures of accountability," the audit says. In particular, it points out that the district's performance score jumped nearly 18 percent between fiscal 2008 and fiscal 2010. The graduation rate in Recovery District high schools also rose nearly 20 percent from fiscal 2009 to 2010.

Though many critics claim the RSD gets an unfair dole from the state, the audit found that spending in fiscal 2010 amounted to \$11,898 per student, excluding one-time, hurricane-related costs. That ranks the district 21st among 57 other Louisiana school districts that did not make one-time hurricane related expenditures.

Rep. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans, who chairs the House Education Committee, released a statement saying, "The RSD has come a long way in the last few years. Even though they still have a long way to go, this report shows the District is headed in the right direction."

.....

Andrew Vanacore can be reached at avanacore@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3304.

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.