



***FORWARD***  
***New Orleans***  
*for Public Schools*



# Midterm Progress Report

[www.schools.forwardneworleans.com](http://www.schools.forwardneworleans.com)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forward New Orleans for Public Schools (FNOPS) is a coalition of diverse civic, business, and neighborhood organizations who joined forces to call on the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to use its authority and resources equitably to enhance the likelihood of success for all Orleans Parish public school students. During the Fall 2012 elections, FNOPS outlined a platform with seven action items and sought pledges of support from the OPSB candidates.

**FNOPS PLATFORM: (1) high quality, high performing public schools; (2) coordination to enable choice; (3) system-wide strategic planning; (4) resource manager for facilities; (5) resource manager for taxes and bonds; (6) resource manager for the fund balance reserve; and (7) fairness and equity for all public school students.**

We promised to monitor performance and report publicly on the OPSB's progress. Accordingly, as the OPSB has entered the second half of its current four year term, we now issue this Midterm Progress Report.

We report significant progress in several areas of the platform, with serious work still remaining. We congratulate the OPSB for the execution of a cooperative endeavor agreement (CEA) with the Recovery School District that enables coordination and collaboration on programming and services for the most vulnerable students city-wide. Highlights of the CEA include the creation of an Exceptional Needs Fund for students with disabilities with the highest needs; coordination on programming for students dealing with truancy, mental health issues, and the transition from the juvenile justice system; and synchronization of systems for early childhood assessment and special needs education. Although it's unfortunate that approval was not unanimous, the execution of the CEA was a momentous step in favor of fairness and equity for all public students, exhibiting the OPSB's dedication to creating a more efficient, transparent, and effective school system.

We also report significant headway with the creation of the School Facilities Maintenance Fund, and OneApp's continued improvement and expansion. Nonetheless, critical needs still remain. The OPSB must establish a School Quality Policy that provides consistent standards for all schools, and holds schools accountable for their failures and successes. The OPSB must develop a Universal Enrollment and Information Policy that preserves and builds upon the successes of OneApp. The OPSB must enact a Strategic Planning Policy that creates a structure for regular assessment of system wide needs and planning for the future. We also urge the OPSB to create policies for use of the School Facilities Maintenance Fund, and to establish policies governing taxes and bonds, as well as the fund balance reserve. Finally, we ask the OPSB to re-commit to an abiding promise of fairness and equity for all public school students.

With the recent hiring of a superintendent, the OPSB now has executive leadership on which it can rely to execute the FNOPS platform objectives and achieve the vision of a school system that equitably serves all Orleans Parish public school students. Even so, we will not see transformational change without persistent public engagement and support. We renew our call on the citizenry to stay informed and insist on a school system that gives every student a meaningful opportunity to succeed. Thank you for joining us in this cause.



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### **INTRODUCTION**

In August 2012, the Forward New Orleans Coalition launched Forward New Orleans for Public Schools (FNOPS). FNOPS is a coalition of diverse civic, neighborhood, and business organizations who joined forces to call on the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to use its authority and resources equitably to enhance the likelihood of success for all public school students, regardless of school district, school type, or ultimate governance structure.

During the Fall 2012 elections, FNOPS outlined a platform with six specific action items: (1) high quality, high performing public schools; (2) coordination to enable choice; (3) system-wide strategic planning; (4) resource manager for facilities; (5) resource manager for taxes and bonds; and (6) resource manager for the fund balance reserve. The platform also included a seventh plank asking each OPSB member to abide in every action by the fundamental tenet that all public schools and all public school students must be treated fairly and equitably.

FNOPS sought pledges from each of the OPSB candidates to implement the platform. FNOPS promised to monitor performance and report publicly on the OPSB’s progress on each of the issues. Accordingly, we now issue this Midterm Progress Report. This report should be read in

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conjunction with the complete platform and candidate scorecards, which can be found at [www.schools.forwardneworleans.com](http://www.schools.forwardneworleans.com). For ease of reference, we have restated each plank in the context of the assessments below.

In this report, we take a comprehensive look at the progress made on each issue since the inauguration of the current Board in January 2013. Major accomplishments of the last two years include: (1) the formalization of a partnership with the Recovery School District (RSD) in a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA) to share resources and coordinate on crucial services that are needed for our most vulnerable students citywide; (2) the creation of a school maintenance fund that will provide a revenue source for maintaining and repairing school buildings; and (3) the continued growth and improvement of the OneApp universal enrollment process. These developments will be discussed under Issues Two, Three, Four and Seven. Additionally, with the recent hiring of a new superintendent, we hope to see similar progress on the other planks of the FNOPS platform in the near future.

We will continue to monitor the actions of the current OPSB members, now half way through the four year term. We urge the OPSB to preserve the gains that have been made and focus on the crucial issues outlined in the FNOPS platform. We urge New Orleans citizenry to engage and provide the public support the OPSB needs to achieve the FNOPS objectives. Only with consistent public engagement will we continue to see progress.

**ISSUE ONE: PROMOTE HIGH QUALITY,  
HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a formal School Quality Policy that, for all OPSB schools (charter and direct-run) that:

- mandates OPSB advocacy for quality public schools for all public school students;
- establishes, enforces, and publicly promulgates clear, objective, and uniform standards for its schools;
- establishes consequences for failure to meet these standards; and
- requires the OPSB to participate in regularized, public reporting on whether schools are meeting these standards.

**OPSB Progress:** The OPSB has not established a comprehensive, formal School Quality Policy, but significant progress has been made with the development of the Charter School Performance Framework. Unfortunately, we have not seen similar progress on a policy for the OPSB's direct-run schools.

Over the course of the 2013-14 school year, the OPSB Charter School Office engaged the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, along with school leaders, parents, and other community members, in developing the Charter School Performance Framework. The Performance Framework sets the academic, organizational, and fiscal standards by which the OPSB will monitor and evaluate charter schools.

The OPSB adopted it during the February and June OPSB Business meetings.<sup>1</sup>

In order to implement and utilize the Performance Framework, OPSB staff developed four new policies that establish new procedures for charter school (1) authorization; (2) evaluation; (3) extension and renewal; and (4) monitoring, intervention, and closure.<sup>2</sup> If approved, the policies would establish a formal school quality policy that meets the requirements of our pledge, but with respect to charter schools only. In December 2014, the OPSB approved two of the policies – Policy A128, charter school extension and renewal, and Policy A129, charter school monitoring, intervention, and closure.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the charter school evaluation policy was voted down at a previous OPSB meeting, and has not been considered since then.<sup>4</sup> The proposed charter school authorization policy, the final piece of the four policy package, has not yet been considered by the OPSB.

In March 2013, the OPSB Accountability Committee requested the creation of a School Performance Dashboard, which would gather information from all schools, charter and direct-

operated, and provide a basis for regular monitoring.<sup>5</sup> Nothing has developed, however.

We call on the OPSB to adopt a full and complete Charter School Performance Framework. We further urge the OPSB to establish a formal, comprehensive School Quality Policy that incorporates the Charter School Performance Framework, and includes similar provisions for its direct-run schools. It is critical that the OPSB enact a School Quality Policy that enables the OPSB to determine which schools are performing at the highest levels, and which schools are struggling to provide the quality education all students deserve.

The OPSB must set and uphold consistent standards for all schools, whether currently under OPSB purview or transitioning from the RSD. As RSD charters are beginning to move to the OPSB, the OPSB must have a policy in place to require consistency in the analysis and determination of whether public schools are providing quality education to all public school students.

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<sup>1</sup> OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 7 (2/18/14) (adoption of organizational and financial framework) (unanimous), and OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 1 (6/17/14) (adoption of academic performance framework) (Usdin, Bloom, Marshall, Koppel in favor; Thomas, Ellison, Cade, opposed).

<sup>2</sup> OPSB Policy Committee Meeting Agenda & Attachments (7/17/14) (proposed policies A126, A127, A128, and A129).

<sup>3</sup> OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 5 (12/16/14) (Policy A128) (Thomas, Usdin, Ellison,

Bloom, Koppel, and Marshall in favor; Cade opposed) and Action Item No. 6 (Policy A129) (Thomas, Usdin, Ellison, Bloom, Koppel, and Marshall in favor; Cade absent).

<sup>4</sup> OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 7 (8/19/14) (Usdin, Bloom, Koppel, and Marshall in favor; Thomas, Cade, and Ellison opposed) (five votes required for policy changes).

<sup>5</sup> Accountability Committee Agenda & Attachments (3/14/13).

## ISSUE TWO: PROVIDE COORDINATION TO ENABLE CHOICE

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a formal Universal Enrollment and Information Policy to require:

- a readily-accessible, single source of consolidated information on all public schools to facilitate parents' ability to choose among schools and school types; and
- participation in a common enrollment process that includes all public schools.

**OPSB Progress:** The OPSB has not established a Universal Enrollment and Information Policy, but we have seen significant progress towards a common enrollment process with the continued growth of OneApp. Despite its rocky start, OneApp continues to improve every year, with ninety-seven K-12 schools participating for the 2015-16 school year. Regrettably, eight OPSB charter schools do not currently participate in OneApp. Yet, the OPSB and the RSD confirmed their commitment to OneApp in a CEA in March 2014, and the OPSB agreed to require all remaining schools join OneApp upon extension or renewal of their charter contracts.

OneApp is a substantial improvement on prior enrollment practices. A recent Times-Picayune Editorial declared OneApp a great tool that has

improved the school enrollment process dramatically.<sup>6</sup> A joint letter to the editor of the Times-Picayune by several groups serving at risk youth in Orleans Parish underscores the positive change: "Maintaining the enrollment process and ensuring that students are not barred from schools due to their challenging circumstances are central to the operation of a school system that values equity."<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, OneApp needs further improvement to make it easier for parents to determine which school is best for their children. As the New Orleans Advocate affirmed in a guest commentary by the Urban League of Greater New Orleans, "[i]n order for parents to have true choice, all schools must be a part of this process."<sup>8</sup>

The OPSB must exhibit a continued commitment to maintain and improve OneApp, especially as charter schools that do not currently participate in OneApp begin to renew their charter contracts with the OPSB. As these charter operators renew, we will pay close attention to make sure the OPSB fulfills its commitment to require these schools join OneApp. Additionally, the OPSB should participate in annual evaluations of OneApp, to make sure that it meets all intended objectives and addresses any parental concerns.

The OPSB lacks an official, single source of consolidated information on all public schools. Fortunately, the non-profit sector has been filling the gap with the New Orleans Parents

<sup>6</sup> "School enrollment still too confusing for New Orleans parents" Editorial. [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com) (12/18/14).

<sup>7</sup> Coco, Jennifer, et al. "New Orleans schools must ensure they are open to all students" Letter to the Editor, [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com) (1/14/15).

<sup>8</sup> McConduit-Diggs, Erika. "Guest commentary: School choice advances promising" Guest Commentary. [www.theadvocate.com](http://www.theadvocate.com) (2/7/2015).

Guide and Urban League of New Orleans' Schools Expo. We thank the New Orleans Parents' Guide and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans' Parent Information Center and Schools Expo for providing information essential to school choice. The work of these organizations needs to be incorporated into the OPSB's external outreach.

We urge the OPSB to establish a formal Universal Enrollment and Information Policy that fortifies its commitment to OneApp and provides a framework for establishing partnerships with the organizations discussed above. The OPSB must take an active role in fine-tuning OneApp to ensure that it is a user-friendly, transparent process, which includes all Orleans Parish public schools.



### ISSUE THREE: ENGAGE IN SYSTEM-WIDE STRATEGIC PLANNING

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a Strategic Planning Policy to require:

- the development of a shared data system to collect and monitor student data and to identify service gaps and needs;
- projected long-term needs and long-term provision for the right number and types of schools;
- annually updated demographic data; and
- coordination with the RSD to assess citywide needs, and interaction of public schools with other institutions, non-governmental agencies, and non-profits.

**OPSB Progress:** the OPSB has not established a formal Strategic Planning Policy. However, we note that this issue is addressed in the March 2014 CEA with the RSD (discussed further under Issue Seven). The CEA includes a commitment by both the OPSB and the RSD to “collaborate to gather and analyze information on student demographic needs and school operator capacity in order to inform decisions by the RSD and OPSB on the number and type of schools needed citywide.”<sup>9</sup>

Although it doesn't establish a formal Strategic Planning Policy, the CEA enables some areas of coordinated strategic planning between the RSD and the OPSB. We note, for example, the OPSB dedicated \$5 million to capitalize a first-of-

<sup>9</sup> See OPSB Business Meeting Agenda & Attachments (3/18/14).



its-kind in Orleans Parish Exceptional Needs Fund. This fund will provide additional support to those schools serving students with disabilities with the highest needs, regardless of school district. Additionally, the OPSB and the RSD committed to use annual funds from Harrah’s Casino to establish citywide services for students dealing with truancy, mental health issues and the transition from the juvenile justice system.

We congratulate the OPSB for its forward-thinking leadership in planning and funding programs that address the needs of our most vulnerable students citywide. There is still a need for a concrete, data-driven Strategic Planning Policy, a critical component of a school system that best serves the diverse needs of all public school students now and in the future. With the recent hiring of a new superintendent, we look forward to seeing action on this objective in the near future.

**ISSUE FOUR: RESOURCE MANAGER FOR FACILITIES**

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a formal Policy on School Facilities Capital Maintenance and Repair to require:

- a financial plan for the capital needs of all public school facilities owned by the OPSB, without regard for the type of school or the governing authority, which identifies all available funding and revenue streams, including \$79 million in 2011 bond proceeds, the annual revenue from Harrah’s, and proceeds from surplus property sales;
- a best practices process for regularized assessment of capital repair and maintenance needs of all public school facilities; and
- prioritization of available funds, taking into account all public facilities, based on objective criteria.

**OPSB Progress:** While a formal policy is yet to be established, major progress has been made on this objective. In September 2014, the OPSB approved a measure that, with the consent of the voters the following December, extended and repurposed an existing millage, creating a funding source for the maintenance and repair of all New Orleans school buildings.<sup>10</sup> Millage revenues are allocated in two phases, according to state legislation, Act 543 of 2014. During the first phase, which will extend until the existing bond debt is retired, the OPSB and the RSD will

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<sup>10</sup> OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 1, Resolution 27-14 (9/16/14) (Usdin, Bloom, Koppel and Marshall in favor; Thomas, Cade, and Ellison opposed).



receive \$15 per pupil to fund their respective facilities offices, and any funds in excess of what is needed to pay the bond debt must be used for emergency repairs. Later, once the bond debt is retired, millage revenues will go to individual school facilities accounts and a revolving loan fund for supplemental assistance. The millage will continue to fund school facilities offices.

With the renewal of the facilities millage and Act 543, it is critical that the OPSB enact a number of policies, including defining what constitutes an emergency repair and having objective criteria for how funding needs will be prioritized. The OPSB should coordinate with the RSD on these policies so the standards are consistent for schools across the city.



## ISSUE FIVE: RESOURCE MANAGER FOR TAXES & BONDS

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a formal Tax and Bond Policy to govern OPSB decisions on whether to adjust school taxes (school property tax or the sales and use tax) or issue bonds, including:

- an inclusive, deliberative process that requires collaboration among the OPSB, all public schools, and the RSD;
- a forecast demonstrating the sufficiency and use of funds for all schools; and
- transparency and public awareness with regard to the entirety of the process and any forthcoming School Board action.

**OPSB Progress:** The OPSB has not established a formal Tax and Bond Policy. The OPSB exercises authority over taxes, bonded indebtedness, and bond proceeds for all public schools in Orleans Parish. It thereby directly impacts the quality of all public schools and the funding to support all public school students, regardless of whether they attend an OPSB, RSD, charter, or direct-run school.

As discussed above under Issue Four, we support the Board's recent decision to authorize the school facilities millage. Nonetheless, all tax decisions should be made pursuant to a framework established in a formal Tax and Bond policy so they carry the full authority that only a deliberative, inclusive process will allow.

**ISSUE SIX: RESOURCE MANAGER FOR  
FUND BALANCE RESERVE**

**FNOPS Pledge:** School Board members must vote in favor of a Fund Balance Reserve Policy that defines the appropriate uses of the fund balance reserve, including:

- an acknowledgement that the fund balance reserve is for the benefit of all public schools;
- a statement of the specific, permissible uses of the fund balance reserve;
- defined situations of financial emergency where it is appropriate for the OPSB to spend the reserve, including guidelines for allocating it to all public schools because emergency circumstances apply to all, such as a decrease in local tax collections, and guidelines for allocating it to fewer than all public schools because one or more of them experiences unique emergency circumstances; and
- a prohibition against the use of the fund balance reserve for any purpose other than those specifically enumerated (including a prohibition on the use of the fund balance reserve for the routine benefit of some schools over others or for recurring central office or general operating expenses).

**OPSB Progress:** While the OPSB has not established a Fund Balance Reserve Policy, we applaud the OPSB’s dedication of \$5 million from the fund balance reserve to capitalize a citywide

Exceptional Needs Fund, discussed above in Issue Three. Capitalizing the Exceptional Needs Fund was an appropriate use of fund balance reserve dollars, as all Orleans Parish public schools have the opportunity to access the funds.

The OPSB currently maintains a general fund balance reserve of approximately \$46.7 million (January 2015 financial statement), but there is no policy that adequately governs the maintenance and use of the funds. As observed by the non-profit research firm Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) in its report *The Accidental Steward*, the OPSB has previously used general fund balance reserve funds for recurring expenses that favor certain types of schools over others.<sup>11</sup> To prevent inappropriate expenditures in future, the OPSB must establish a formal policy that ensures the funds are used appropriately and for the benefit of all public schools in Orleans Parish.



<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bgr.org/reports/report-looks-at-school-boards-performance-as-financial-steward/> (report released April 2013, addressing FY 2011).

## ISSUE SEVEN: AN ABIDING PROMISE OF FAIRNESS & EQUITY

**FNOPS Pledge:** The above six issues required specific action on critical issues existing at the time the platform was created. When developing the platform, we expected the need for action would expand to include additional, new issues that require an appreciation of, and commitment to, fairness and equity. It is our expectation that School Board members would approach these new issues consistent with the principles of FNOPS, and abide by the fundamental tenet that all public schools and all public school students must be treated fairly and equitably.

**OPSB Progress:** In March 2014, the OPSB took a momentous step in favor of fairness and equity for all students when it approved a CEA with the RSD to coordinate and collaborate to provide programming for at-risk and special needs students and ensure expanded access to quality facilities for more students.<sup>12</sup> Providing greater accountability, transparency, and fairness, the CEA includes the following:

1. a commitment to continue to collaborate on assessing student needs and planning for the appropriate type and number of schools citywide;
2. a commitment to continuing and building on the One App enrollment program;

3. collaboration to provide citywide early education services. The OPSB will operate the Child Find Office, which will locate and assess all 2 to 5 year old children in the city. The RSD will operate the Early Learning Center, a citywide program which will provide education services to 3 and 4 year old children with disabilities in the 2014-15 school year;
4. further coordination on a citywide program to address at-risk students dealing with truancy, mental health issues, and the transition from the juvenile justice system, operated by the RSD;
5. creation and capitalization of a shared Exceptional Needs Fund for students with disabilities with the highest needs citywide;
6. agreement with respect to improving school buildings and coordinating uses of school buildings; and
7. shared funding to implement the above mentioned services for early childhood education and at risk students.

Though it's unfortunate the CEA was not approved unanimously by the OPSB, the execution of this agreement was a watershed moment for the post-Katrina era OPSB. The CEA exhibits the OPSB's commitment to preserving resources, dedication to equity in serving the diverse needs of all Orleans Parish public school students, and ability to compromise for the greater good.

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<sup>12</sup> OPSB Business Meeting Minutes, Action Item No. 5 (3/18/14) (Usdin, Ellison, Bloom, Koppel, and Marshall in favor; Thomas and Cade opposed).



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