

Educate Now! calls for Accountability and Performance Standards in the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence (Voucher) program

Analysis of state testing data now shows that the students participating in the voucher program performed worse than the students in the Recovery School District, said Educate Now! Founder Leslie Jacobs. Moreover, four of the voucher schools in the state-funded program performed worse than any other New Orleans Recovery School District campus.

In 2008, the Louisiana Legislature passed the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program to provide tuition vouchers to low-income students in Orleans Parish to attend private and parochial schools or public schools outside of Orleans Parish. The purpose was to give parents better, higher quality school options other than attending a failing school. Any non-failing public school outside of Orleans Parish and any non-public school that had been open for three or more years could participate in the program.

Three-years into the program, there is now adequate data to measure the academic progress of voucher students verses that of their RSD public school cohorts.

“We have analyzed the performance figures and we have identified surprisingly disparate student outcomes,” said Ms. Jacobs.

As of February 15 in the 2010-11 school year, there were 1,653 students in grades K-5 enrolled in 34 participating “voucher” or “scholarship” schools, according to data supplied by the Louisiana Department of Education. These scholarship students in grades 3-5 take the Louisiana LEAP and iLeap tests, as do public school students.

An Educate Now! comparison of the performance of 3rd - 5th graders in the voucher program to the performance of 3rd - 5th graders in the New Orleans RSD schools shows that only 38 percent of the voucher students performed on grade level versus 49 percent of the RSD students. Statewide, 75 percent of Louisiana’s public school students are performing on grade level or better.

Ms. Jacobs noted that RSD schools outperformed the voucher schools despite the requirement that RSD schools must enroll and include in their testing results students with disabilities. The schools participating in the voucher program are exempt from IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

Of the 34 schools participating in the voucher program, eight enrolled 61 percent of the voucher students. Each of these eight schools – St. Joan of Arc, St. Leo the Great, St. Alphonsus, St. Mary’s Academy, Resurrection of Our Lord, The Upperroom Bible Church Academy, St. Peter Claver, and Holy Ghost Elementary-- tests enough students to provide school level results for LEAP/iLEAP. Educate Now! compared the performance of these eight schools to the performance of the 50 RSD New Orleans schools enrolling students in grades 3, 4 or 5.

Two of the participating schools – St. Joan of Arc and St. Leo the Great – performed in the top five of all compared Orleans RSD and voucher schools and were above the state average: St. Joan of Arc had 86 percent of its students performing on grade level or better; St. Leo the Great had 82 percent.

“St. Joan of Arc and St. Leo the Great did a terrific job. Their performance is what one would expect from this program and they are giving their students better educational opportunities,” said Mrs. Jacobs.

The news is not good for the remaining six schools.

Each of the six remaining schools would rank in the bottom 20 percent of RSD schools. In fact, four of the voucher schools – Resurrection of Our Lord, Upperroom Bible Church Academy, St. Peter Claver and Holy Ghost Elementary School – performed worse than any other RSD school, direct-run or charter, with only 13 percent of Upperroom Bible Church school’s 3rd - 5th graders performing on grade level, according to test data released by the Louisiana Department of Education.

Percent Basic or Above English and Math Grades 3, 4, 5 by School			
RSD	Charter	94%	Akili Academy of New Orleans
RSD	Charter	88%	Martin Behrman Elementary School
Voucher	Private	86%	ST. JOAN OF ARC SCHOOL (C)
RSD	Charter	86%	Lafayette Academy of New Orleans
Voucher	Private	82%	ST. LEO THE GREAT SCHOOL (C)
		75%	STATE AVG- All Students
		49%	RSD AVG- All Students
Voucher	Private	39%	ST. ALPHONSUS SCHOOL (C)
		38%	VOUCHER AVG-All Students
Voucher	Private	37%	ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (GIRLS) (C)
RSD	Traditional	27%	Dr. Charles Richard Drew Elementary School: lowest performing RSD K-8 school
Voucher	Private	23%	RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD SCHOOL (C)
Voucher	Private	22%	THE UPPERROOM BIBLE CHURCH ACADEMY
Voucher	Private	21%	ST. PETER CLAVER SCHOOL (C)
Voucher	Private	13%	HOLY GHOST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (C)

“The purpose of the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence program was to give public school students and parents access to high quality educational options so they would not have to attend a failing school,” said Ms. Jacobs. “But the data shows that some of the non-public schools participating in the voucher program are not giving these students better educational opportunities. In fact, every single RSD school is out-performing the bottom four voucher schools. This is absolutely inexcusable.”

There is currently no accountability or performance standards for the private and parochial schools participating in the Scholarships for Educational Excellence program and Governor Jindal vetoed over the weekend a legislative provision which would have set such standards.

“There is no academic standard for initial participation, no criteria for continued participation, and no way to exclude a school based on performance,” said Ms. Jacobs. “The Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence does not let failing public schools participate; it should not let low performing non-public schools participate in the voucher program. Clearly, if two of the eight schools can be top performers, then we should have the expectation of performance from every voucher school.”

Educate Now! will call upon the Governor and the Legislature to enact standards in the scholarship program, said Ms. Jacobs.

“Participating non-public schools should be held to the same minimum standard as public schools as a condition of continued participation in the program. Additionally, parents should be given information on the performance of the participating schools, including how this performance compares to other schools in the RSD,” said Ms. Jacobs.

“Educate Now! supports giving parents quality choices, but the operative word is quality,” said Ms. Jacobs. “Private schools that cannot deliver quality should be removed from this program, and we should instead use these funds to expand scholarship opportunities at the higher-performing private schools in New Orleans or to expand scholarship opportunities for low-income students in failing schools in other parts of the state.”

Educate Now! is a non-profit dedicated to the effective and sustainable reform of New Orleans Public schools.

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