



Everything New Orleans

School Board isn't ready for mass return of New Orleans schools: Editorial

By **The Editorial Board, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune**

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After almost 2 ½ years of squabbling and multiple searches, the Orleans Parish School Board hired the system's new superintendent in January. Henderson Lewis Jr., the new leader, **has an impressive resume** and strong experience as superintendent of East Feliciana schools, a School Board member in St. Bernard Parish and the founding principal post-Katrina of the Algiers Technology Academy. But he is just starting his new job.

As for the School Board, it is notoriously fractious. And, worse, it continues to be marred by scandal. Board member Ira Thomas resigned in March after charged by federal prosecutors of accepting a bribe to try to rig a School Board contract. He **pleaded guilty Wednesday** (May 13) in U.S. District Court.

Authorities said a school system employee aided Mr. Thomas in his bribery scheme. An unnamed OPSB employee approached a janitorial services contractor in September 2013 to solicit the bribe on behalf of Mr. Thomas, the federal bill of information said.

And this is the moment when legislators **might force the immediate return** of roughly three dozen schools from the state-run Recovery School District to Orleans Parish School Board control?

They can't be serious.

House Bill 166 would require schools that are no longer failing under Louisiana's accountability system to be returned to OPSB within a year. Currently, those schools can decide for themselves whether they want to be overseen by the School Board or stay with RSD.

Thirty-four charter schools that meet that definition have voted to remain under RSD. HB 166 would shift to OPSB as soon as this fall.

With a new superintendent, a damaged board and a suspect central office staff, OPSB could within a few months more than double the schools it oversees. Even without those challenges, adding that much management capacity would be difficult in such a short amount of time.

Legislators also ought to consider what the leaders, teachers, students and parents at these schools want.

Ben Kleban spoke for New Orleans College Prep at the May 6 meeting when the House Education Committee approved HB 166 9-8. His school voted against returning to OPSB. "We want to choose to come back. But now is not the time," he said.

Mr. Lewis has said he plans to restructure and beef up the system's central office, but he hasn't yet had a chance to do that. "If we go too fast too soon, we risk the relapse and we risk rewinding the progress we've made," Mr. Kleban said.

The desire to return to local control over schools is understandable. But there were very good reasons almost all New Orleans schools post-Katrina were turned over to RSD.

Academically, the old school system was one of the worst in the state. And the bureaucracy was bloated and corrupt. Former School Board President Ellenese Brooks-Simms pleaded guilty in 2007 to **taking \$140,000 in bribes** while on the board. A federal probe of Orleans Parish schools resulted in 29 indictments of employees and contractors for crimes that include bribery, fraud and theft.

On top of that, some board members showed no interest in getting schools open quickly after the flooding in 2005.

In the decade since Katrina, the School Board could have been preparing to get back the schools it lost. Board members could have shown they can work together for the well being of students. They could have become a model operation — leaner, smarter and focused only on children.

The system did get its finances in order and finally got a clean audit. But too often New Orleanians have been subjected to infighting so severe that nothing gets done. The superintendent search is a prime example.

"Has the district done anything to change their habits, their bad policies, their culture, their leadership?" Caroline Roemer Shirley, director of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, asked at the Education Committee meeting.

The answer is no. At least, not enough.

It is telling that more than 30 schools had a chance to return to OPSB this year and only one voted to do so.

That isn't inertia at play. Those school votes show a lack of comfort with the School Board — even though charter boards would still run their schools. How could there not be concerns, though, after the spectacle of the past two years?

Proponents of a return to School Board control are right that local oversight would be ideal. It is important for residents, particularly parents, to have a voice in the direction of city schools. The state-run RSD, although it has improved since a rough start in 2006, is more remote and autocratic than a local board.

But just being more democratic does not make the School Board ready for a mass return of schools.

The school system should have a strategic, well-reasoned plan for the return of schools. Mr. Lewis may be the person to put that in place. The board member who replaces Mr. Thomas may help transform the board.

But HB 166 doesn't require any strategic planning for return. And some committee members seemed interested only in not having to talk about the RSD any more.

That's not smart — and it's not fair to the children counting on these schools.

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