

Activity 17.19

[s2008/s2008-108]

In September 2005, New Orleans was devastated by flooding brought on by Hurricane Katrina. The majority of the population was forced to leave the city permanently.

Before the hurricane, the New Orleans school system was a disaster and had been so for years.

This article reports on changes in the school system following Hurricane Katrina.

From the Changes at New Orleans Schools Bring Gains in Test Scores

By ADAM NOSSITER

New York Times, 7 May 2008

NEW ORLEANS.

A broad education overhaul under way here has produced improvement in test scores, results released Tuesday showed, though many students are still struggling.

The number of fourth graders who passed a state promotional exam increased by 12 percentage points over the previous year, and eighth graders improved by four percentage points.

School officials also noted significant increases in the numbers of students with passing scores in the test's various components - English, math, science, social studies and reading.

Nonetheless, more than half the students who took the test in those grades did not pass, and 60 percent of high school students got an unsatisfactory ranking in standardized English and math tests, a figure three to four times higher than the percentage throughout Louisiana.

Still, even the limited progress is an improvement over stagnant conditions before Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, officials said - and before the significant changes in governance and instruction that the battered school district here has undergone.

"The gains at the fourth- and eighth-grade level are impressive, and significantly outperform the state, and New Orleans historically didn't outperform the state," said Leslie Jacobs, a former state school board member and long-time education reformer here.

Forty-eight percent of fourth graders passed the promotion exam, and 36 percent of eighth graders.

Paul G. Vallas, the superintendent brought in a year ago from Philadelphia to replicate improvements made there and in Chicago, said test scores in New Orleans were still "very, very low," but he maintained that any improvement was a welcome surprise.

"People were saying, 'Don't expect growth the first year,' " Mr. Vallas said. "We saw growth the first year."

Since Hurricane Katrina, most of the schools here have been taken over by the state, and are run either by Mr. Vallas or as citizen-controlled charter schools. The local school board and administration - long notorious for corruption and political interference - have been neutered.

Classes are smaller, many of the teachers are youthful imports brought in by groups like Teach for America, principals have been reshuffled or removed, school-hours remedial programs have been intensified, and after-school programs to help students increased.

Still, the challenge remains substantial in a school district of 32,000, where 85 percent of the students are at least several years below their grade levels.

Mr. Vallas attributed many of the improvements in testing to the new teachers.

“The biggest contributing factor was the quality of the instructors,” he said.

Write a several-paragraph long critique of this report. Your critique should:

1. Identify what is the measured response variable that supports the claim that conditions in the school have improved.
2. Identify what explanatory variables are claimed to cause the change in the response variable.
3. Imagining that you had access to the data frame with the response and explanatory variables, describe what constitutes a “unit of analysis,” that is, what is a case in the data frame. How many cases were there?
4. Describe how the explanatory variables were measured and incorporated into the analysis of the response variable.
5. Give an overall evaluation of the credibility of the causal claims made in the report.
6. Suggest plausible ways in which the data underlying the report might be analyzed in a more informative way.
7. Identify possible covariates that ought to be considered.
8. Comment on any other compelling or unconvincing aspects of the report.