



## How Revised Charter School Criteria Could Help Reduce the Epidemic of Disconnected Youth in New Orleans

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New Orleans has one of the highest numbers of disconnected youth in the country. Some 26,234 youths – or 18.2% of the total city youth population – between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither enrolled in school nor employed. Many become disconnected when schools push or counsel them out due to problem behaviors or low performance. Title 28 of the Louisiana education law governing charter schools is partly responsible for the city's high numbers of disconnected youth. A total of 76 out of 83 New Orleans public schools are charter schools, and Title 28's strong emphasis on student achievement as a measure of charter performance encourages schools to push and counsel out low-achieving students. School leaders worry that they could lose their charters if too many students register low scores.

Pushing and counseling kids to leave school violates their civil rights, especially in the cases of children with disabilities. Because these practices are highly questionable and in some cases illegal, exact numbers are not available from schools trying to cover up dubious actions. However, these practices place a significant financial burden on taxpayers, because disconnected youth generally fare worse in life than peers who remain in school. To avoid unwanted school actions and deleterious social consequences, modifications in Title 28 should expand criteria for school assessment to include discipline practices, student retention rates, and school climate, with the aim of reducing the number of disconnected youth in New Orleans.

### Causes and Impacts

Title 28 places heavy emphasis on student test scores as the main criterion for determining charter school funding and renewal. Charter operators worried about charter renewal become less willing to accept or retain students who need extra support to meet class-wide standards; schools have an incentive to push out poorly performing students.

One way for schools to push out problem students is through suspension and expulsion. Many charter schools use zero-tolerance behavior policies to suspend student for minor infractions. But upon return to school, suspended students often engage in similar or worse behaviors, increasing chances for future suspensions. Furthermore, suspensions disproportionately happen to minorities, children of lower socioeconomic status, poor academic achievers, and students in special education classes. Excessive suspensions can violate the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – and violations have already forced several schools to settle a class action suit.

Disconnected youth fit the same profile as those who tend to be suspended and expelled. They are more likely than connected peers to live in poverty, more likely to leave high school without a diploma, and more likely to have disabilities. According to the numbers in a 2013 study, New Orleans' disconnected youth cost taxpayers roughly \$127.8 million dollars per year in payments for incarceration, Medicaid, public assistance, and Supplemental Security Income welfare payments. Supporting a student through completion of high school, even if that student has disabilities or is impoverished, costs taxpayers far less than pushing students out of school.

### What Can Policymakers Do?

To reduce the alarming number and high costs of disconnected youth in New Orleans, lawmakers should make some key changes to the charter evaluation criteria in Title 28.

- **A revised law should include discipline rates as an evaluation criterion.** School discipline policies must specify various levels of infractions and appropriate discipline methods to ensure that students

are not suspended for minor infractions. This measure would also decrease the potential for future lawsuits. Considering the potentially severe consequences for state school boards and individual schools that over-suspend – not to mention the harms done to suspended students and their families – violations of this provision should be dealt with severely. Consequences could range from personal fines for school principals to loss of teaching licenses and even school charters. Independent state-appointed monitors should ensure compliance.

- **Evaluation criteria for charter schools should include student retention, especially in high schools.** Although the Recovery School District and Orleans Parish School District have policies in place to monitor suspension and expulsion rates, instances of pushing and counseling out usually are not recorded as either suspension or expulsion. Because charter schools operate on the principle of school choice, some attrition will be natural as parents and students move between schools. However, schools with high attrition rates should be flagged for closer monitoring, and either afforded opportunities to reduce their attrition rates or sanctioned if attrition is found to be due to pushing students or counseling them out. Repeated failure to reduce attrition should impact a school's performance score.
- **The law should specifically require teachers and school administrators to create positive school climate plans unique to each school.** Positive school climate is linked to lower rates of suspension in high schools and decreased student absenteeism in middle and high schools. A positive climate also improves teacher retention, reduces violence, and improves student achievement. "Climate" includes factors such as school size, adequacy of facilities, personal feelings of safety, effective classroom management, and opportunities for positive student/teacher interactions. Legal revisions should help schools improve their climates – with increases in school funding and specific rewards, monetary or otherwise, for teachers and students who contribute to this effort. Schools with comprehensive plans could also potentially earn higher performance scores.

Legal revisions such as these could broaden the criteria for evaluating New Orleans charter schools in ways that could help reduce practices that separate too many students from the educational process. Evidence suggests that current narrowly focused standards for measuring charter school performance have the unfortunate side effect of encouraging schools to push students out. Resulting high rates of disconnected youth in New Orleans put a great burden on taxpayers and create potential for costly adverse legal judgements due to civil rights violations. Policy changes can mitigate this problem, and it falls on those who write the charter schools law to do the right thing for the children of New Orleans and Louisiana.