

Are charter schools delivering on their promise?

By Dillon Lowe



When Jared Lamb talks about [BASIS Materra](#), where he serves as head of school, the pride in his voice is evident.

And that's for good reason: Last year, the charter school was the only open-enrollment public school in Baton Rouge to receive an "A" performance letter grade from the Louisiana Department of Education.

For Lamb, BASIS Materra's success can be attributed to a number of factors—its accelerated curriculum and its targeted interventions for struggling students, for instance—but he says its greatest assets are far and away its teachers.

“It’s no secret that the real magic happens within schools through the direct work that teachers are doing with students every day,” he says. “And we look to hire the best to work with our students. We spend a lot of time not only recruiting great teachers to work here but creating conditions where outstanding teachers can see themselves making our school their home in the long term.”

Since opening its doors in 2018, BASIS Materra has steadily expanded, growing from a K-4 school to a K-10 campus with plans to serve K-12 by 2026. It’s part of BASIS Charter Schools, a national charter network that also includes Baton Rouge’s [BASIS Mid City](#), a K-5 school that serves as a feeder campus for BASIS Materra. (To its credit, BASIS Mid City saw its performance letter grade rise from a “D” to a “B” last year.)

BASIS Materra’s success has helped it to stand out in a competitive charter landscape—a landscape that has evolved significantly in recent years as charter schools have become an increasingly influential force in Louisiana’s education marketplace. In Baton Rouge, roughly 30% of all public school students now attend one, and in New Orleans, charter schools make up nearly the entire public education system.

But BASIS Materra’s “A” letter grade frames it as something of an outlier among charter schools in Baton Rouge, raising an important question: Are charter schools as a whole living up to their promise?

DIGGING INTO THE DATA

At their core, charter schools are publicly funded but independently operated open-enrollment schools that are given more flexibility in their curriculums and general operations than traditional public schools in exchange for greater accountability. They must meet specific performance benchmarks or risk losing their charters.

Supporters argue that charter schools can offer a more innovative and personalized learning environment for students, potentially leading to better educational outcomes. Critics, however, often raise concerns about funding and oversight.

In Baton Rouge, there are currently 27 charter schools serving 13,400 students.

Data from the Louisiana Department of Education’s 2024 School Performance Scores suggests that charter schools in Baton Rouge are, on average, outperforming their traditional public school counterparts in terms of academic growth and overall

performance. Seventy-nine percent of charter schools in Baton Rouge received a performance letter grade of “C” or better last year compared to 50% of traditional open-enrollment public schools, and 40% of charter schools in Baton Rouge ranked in the top 25% of Louisiana schools for academic growth.

Noemi Donoso, CEO of [New Schools for Baton Rouge](#), says the data shows that the local charter ecosystem is maturing and producing results. Established in 2012, NSBR is a nonprofit that has been instrumental in driving charter expansion in the city.

“In terms of performance, we are very, very optimistic and proud of what we’re seeing,” Donoso says. “Seven of our charter schools improved by at least one letter grade in the past year, and notably, not one single school dropped. To us, that shows very consistent progress across the city.”

Last year, charter schools in Baton Rouge increased the number of students enrolled in “high-quality” seats by 19%, or 2,476 seats. A seat is considered high quality if a school receives an “A” or “B” letter grade from the state or a “C” while ranking in the top third statewide for academic growth. The number of students enrolled in high-quality seats in Baton Rouge’s open-enrollment district-run schools decreased by 1,000 to 25%.

BASIS schools were not the only charter schools in Baton Rouge to see strong results last year.

According to NSBR, GEO Next Generation High School and Madison Preparatory Academy were the two highest-performing open-enrollment high schools in the city, while Baton Rouge Ochsner Discovery Health Sciences Academy and Prescott Academy respectively ranked in the top 1% and 6% of Louisiana schools in terms of academic growth in their first year of operation.

In addition to having high-quality teachers, Donoso says another key factor separating the highest-performing schools from the poorer performers is strong leadership.

“It feels kind of obvious, but whether it’s a charter school or a district-run school, what we’ve seen is that you’ve got to have a strong leader who knows how to prioritize students first and foremost and put students at the center when it comes to resources and decision-making,” she says.

While the data paints a clear picture of how charter schools in Baton Rouge are helping to drive academic gains across the city, NSBR founder Chris Meyer is quick to point out

that charter schools and traditional public schools should not be seen as in competition with one another and that overall academic performance across the entire East Baton Rouge Parish School System is also on the rise.

"I don't think it's right to look at this as an 'us versus them' situation because that was never the goal," says Meyer, who stepped away from his role as CEO of NSBR in 2022 to assume his current role as CEO of the [Baton Rouge Area Foundation](#). "What's going to matter is not, 'Did I choose a public charter or a public district-run school or a public magnet?' It's going to be, 'Did I pick a school that worked for me and my family?'"

Meyer adds that while charter schools are not a silver bullet for all that ails Louisiana's education system, they have demonstrated their ability to improve outcomes for students who might have otherwise been stuck in underperforming schools because of where they live or how much money their families have.

A NEW MODEL

Perhaps no one had a closer view of the early days of Louisiana's charter movement than former state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek, who was a key architect of the post-Katrina education reforms that eventually transformed New Orleans into a majority-charter school system.

In the wake of the storm, the city's struggling public schools were largely taken over by the state-run Recovery School District and converted into charter schools. In the time since, student performance indicators—test scores, college readiness metrics, graduation rates—have improved significantly compared to pre-Katrina levels.

Pastorek points to New Orleans' transformation as a proof point for the charter model's potential.

"The all-charter experiment in New Orleans began in 2006, and almost 20 years later, we don't have an 'F' school in the city of New Orleans," Pastorek says. "That's quite an accomplishment."

THE NEXT GENERATION

Despite the progress being made by many charter schools in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, recent controversies have brought with them renewed scrutiny.

IDEA Public Schools, a prominent charter network that got its start in Texas before expanding into Florida, Louisiana and Ohio, announced its exit from Louisiana earlier this year due primarily to poor academic performance. Around the same time, the founder of Impact Charter School in Baker was accused of misusing \$1.5 million in public funds for personal expenses.

But Caroline Roemer, executive director of the [Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools](#), says that while those controversies make for good headlines, they're not indicative of any broader struggles for Louisiana's charter movement.

On the issue of IDEA, Roemer says the charter network's exit from Louisiana is actually a sign that the system is working as intended.

"IDEA recognized that they were not fulfilling their promise to improve outcomes for students and made a student-focused decision to step aside and let others do that work," she says. "I applaud them for doing the right thing. It's a perfect example of what sets charter schools apart from traditional public and private schools. Move kids forward or get out of the way."

And when it comes to Impact, Roemer says the allegations against the school's founder should not be used to discredit the vast majority of charter schools that operate aboveboard.

"Financial mismanagement is not an issue limited to certain types of schools," she says. "People with the wrong intentions exist in all walks of life. For decades, most charter schools have operated without the financial malfeasance we've recently read about in the news. Charter schools must adhere to rigorous financial standards. ... Unfortunately, sometimes people figure out loopholes to the rules, creating an inaccurate perception that all charter schools are bad."

Pastorek holds a similar view. He says situations like IDEA's exit from Louisiana, while "anomalous," are a product of the high degree of accountability that charter schools are held to.

"Overall, I think charter schools have been successful, but I think the idea that charter schools that don't perform must go out of business is an important one," Pastorek says.

One of the most common criticisms levied against charter schools is that they divert much-needed resources from traditional public schools, as funding for public schools is allocated based on student enrollment. The national [Institute for Youth in Policy](#), for instance, says charter schools tend to create financial instability for traditional public schools as enrollment shifts.

“When a new charter school opens, it must pull students away from the traditional public school system to fill its classrooms,” a statement from the institute reads. “Thus, the chronic overbuilding of charter schools results in massive revenue cuts for public schools in the same area.”

Meyer, however, calls that a “decade-old argument” that does little to address the broader issue of how families can best be empowered, while Roemer contends that public education funding should prioritize student outcomes above all else, including school type.

“Education dollars are following students to their public school of choice and in return, the charter school is held accountable to academic, financial and legal standards,” Roemer says. “Instead of arguing about who is getting the dollars, we should focus on funding formulas that ensure every student’s needs are met.”

URL: <https://www.businessreport.com/business/are-charter-schools-delivering-on-their-promise>