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**Subject:** Straight Up Conversation: New Louisiana Schools Chief John White

## Straight Up Conversation: New Louisiana Schools Chief John White

By [Rick Hess](#) on February 6, 2012 7:49 AM

In January, 36-year-old John White took the reins as the state superintendent of education in Louisiana. He was appointed by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on a 9-1 vote, inheriting the ambitious reform legacy of his predecessor, Paul Pastorek. White had moved to Louisiana in 2011 to take over as head of the state's pioneering Recovery School District. John's previous roles included a stint with Chancellor Joel Klein in New York City and as an executive director of Teach For America in Chicago and New Jersey. Given Louisiana's outsized profile in the school reform world (and my own continuing curiosity that dates to my days teaching in Baton Rouge), I thought it'd be interesting to talk with him about his efforts. Here's what he had to say:

**Rick Hess:** You're moving into the role of state chief after having already served as head of Louisiana's Recovery School District. And, you're stepping in as state supe in a state that is widely regarded as a national reform leader. How does all of that shape your mindset and your agenda?

**John White:** On the one hand, it's very emboldening to be in a place that has the courage to say, "Even if it's good, it's not good enough," and to press further faster. On the other hand, having been RSD superintendent, I know that oftentimes the state bureaucracy can impede the progress that local superintendents are trying to make. So on the one hand, I am emboldened, and on the other hand, I am committed to empowering people at the local level to make change.

**RH:** What's an example of how the state bureaucracy got in your way at the RSD?

**JW:** Oftentimes people in Washington and people in state capitals don't fully appreciate the sheer volume of work that legislatures and bureaucracies have created over time, and how much time that takes for people working day-to-day in districts and charter schools. So, for example, dozens of reports from one office to the next are not coordinated with one another. And when you think about that, those reports are oftentimes literally required in districts with 100,000 kids and by one individual charter school with 300 kids. You quickly realize how perverse that system is.

**RH:** How much of an opportunity do you think you will have to rectify some of those problems, or are these federal rules that are out of your hands?

**JW:** No, I think a lot of it is within our control; more than we think is within our control. And it's no one individual's fault. We've all been telling each other, "This is how things are done," for however many years. And you know, part of the job of a state

education agency should be getting out of the way.

**RH:** So given that, what is your agenda? What are the top priorities for your first year?

**JW:** I think there are really three things. We are participating in the national program of raising standards for student and teacher performance. Our schools and districts need to focus as much of their energies on that as possible. But we are not being honest if we say that our current system is, in and of itself, adequate to get every child prepared for a college degree or a professional career. So, second, we are committed to building a system of choices, not just among traditional public schools, but also charter schools, private schools, higher education, and workplace experiences. Finally, in order to do either of those things, we have to relieve the burdens that we have unnecessarily placed on school districts and on entrepreneurs. We constantly report and monitor things that have nothing to do with student achievement.

**RH:** Your predecessor, Paul Pastorek, voiced frustration about some of the difficulties extending the reach of the RSD model beyond New Orleans. How big a concern is that?

**JW:** Looking at the successes that we've had in our high density urban environment and thinking about how those principles play out in an environment of low population concentration far from our big economic hubs, there are real challenges.... But we have the evidence that we can make progress toward our most dramatic challenges. And ten years ago, if you would have said New Orleans will soon be performing at the state average in literacy, you would have been laughed at.

**RH:** Speaking of urban environments, national observers have heard a lot about what's happened in New Orleans. But how, for instance, is Baton Rouge faring? Are you seeing similarly dramatic efforts?

**JW:** Other large cities [in the state] haven't taken on the comprehensive reform in the way that New Orleans has. And in Louisiana and across the country you'll hear people say, "Well, [New Orleans did so] because of the flood." But a flood doesn't have anything immediately to say about how you educate your children. We can create the conditions for change in any one of our parishes. And if we don't, it's because we are choosing not to.

**RH:** So, is it fair to say you think other areas of the state needs some of the same kind of systemic reform we've seen in New Orleans?

**JW:** It's completely fair to view any school system as one that requires whole system transformation, and then you can create a plan to do that. It's also fair to say that if it's a real plan for kids, it invariably will involve adults changing the way they do their work, and that it will look different from setting to setting. A rural parish with five schools is obviously going to have a different set of challenges and opportunities than an urban district with 100 schools. But every school system is one that can be transformed.

**RH:** Louisiana has moved aggressively on a number of fronts, such as evaluating teacher programs, teacher value added, and data systems. Are there particular successes or challenges worth noting?

**JW:** I am proud of how committed the state has been to giving its teachers the roadmap to success through its evaluation system. Many states have come up against, frankly, adult- oriented challenges, and our state is moving ahead with great urgency. I think that our accountability reforms, and our entrepreneurial approach to charter schools and for educators to think outside the box, have been tremendous contributions to people's sense of what's possible. But we have a really long way to go. Though our graduation rate increased three points last year alone, we still only graduate seven in ten of our kids. And our ACT average is still hovering at less than twenty. So the mission of getting every child on track to a college degree or professional career still has a ways to go.

**RH:** How much of a consideration is it that Louisiana has relatively weak collective bargaining provisions compared, say, to New York, where you worked previously?

**JW:** It's a factor. But you know, we still see seniority-based compensation, compensation based on master's degree and professional development, credit-based financial awards based exclusively on seniority, just because that's the old way of doing

things and because it's not hard. The problem is it doesn't help kids. So, the actual mindset about what's good for children is a much bigger challenge to overcome than is collective bargaining or any other regulation.

**RH:** Louisiana pioneered the RSD model that's now being imitated elsewhere, in states like Tennessee and Michigan. What are a couple of key lessons or cautions that you think others would do well to take from Louisiana's experience?

**JW:** I think two things are needed to sustain the change. One, investments in talented educators from the get-go; without a high-quality workforce, no reform will move ahead. Second, we need to get to a place where the community is pulling the change. A government can't do it alone. We need organizations that are actively building a sense of the community's power to choose a better education for the children. Until we have that, our reforms will be provider-led rather than consumer-led; that's sustainable for a while, but not in perpetuity.

**RH:** How do you see your relationship with the RSD in your new role?

**JW:** I plan to be very involved, because New Orleans is showing us two things. One is that children, even the children with the greatest level of challenge--and having worked in New York and in Chicago, I can tell you that the children in New Orleans face challenges that are on par with any I have ever worked with--can be excellently prepared for life after 12th grade. They can achieve anything the rest of us can achieve. And second, that we may well have to think completely differently about our work each day in order to achieve it. That may even go beyond talking about rigorous teacher evaluation systems and Common Core standards to do things that are counterintuitive to many of us in government--like actually recognizing that people on the ground might know more than we do.

**RH:** New Orleans has benefited greatly in recent years from the post-Katrina infusion of philanthropy and talent. As Katrina recedes and funders and talent providers turn elsewhere, how difficult is it going to be to sustain the momentum?

**JW:** Difficult, but school reform is an organizational challenge. And the greatest way of recruiting talented people is having organizations that are led by talented people and empowering their leaders to do what they need to do. We have set up organizations that have been allowed to flourish. That's much more sustainable than any superintendent-led school system. A district like Philadelphia, which has had a difficult superintendent transition, could take months or even years to get back on track to a coherent reform plan. Our schools are strong organizations unto themselves. And provided we can keep making courageous decision to replicate high-performing schools and remove low-performing schools, then we will be okay.

**RH:** Post-Katrina, there were concerns about outsiders invading New Orleans schooling. There have been intense racial politics. How did you negotiate that during your time at the RSD, and how does that shape your approach going forward?

**JW:** It's extremely important as a leader to never give up on your ideals. But on the other hand, never give up on respecting everyone at the table. That gives you a baseline of credibility off of which to operate.

**RH:** Can you offer an example of how you do this?

**JW:** Yes, at John McDonogh High School. When I first came to New Orleans, the word on the Street was we were going to shut down the building of that 100-year-old high school. And now we've announced that we are spending \$35 million to renovate it. Steve Barr [founder of Green Dot Public Schools] and teachers now are going to take over the school's management...By staying at the table, by sitting through the discussion, by always insisting that this can be a college and career school, we had a compelling vision that attracted great partners, and are in a position to turn one of the lowest performing high schools in the country into a real beacon for change.

**RH:** You previously worked in New York under Joel Klein. Can you talk a bit about what your responsibilities were there and what lessons you've taken from that experience?

**JW:** I had two different responsibilities [in New York]. One, as Deputy Chancellor for talent, labor, and innovation, was to manage labor policy, teacher evaluation, compensation, union relations, and so on. The other job, as head of our portfolio group, was to create charter schools, close low-performing schools, plan enrollment changes, and so on. And those jobs are

almost diametrically opposed, because one is about improving the guts of the system as it currently exists, and one is about trying to create a new system of choices.

And on one hand I learned that you should never, even as you are calling for change, give up on trying to reach the teacher, the average classroom teacher that's out there, because it will always surprise you how many of them agree with you even when people say they don't. But on the other hand, [I learned] that we can't [allow] hundreds of pages of union contracts, thousands of pages of regulations [to stop us] from creating great options for our kids. They can't wait.

**RH:** In your new role, which state chiefs out there are you looking to as models or mentors? And what have been a couple of the most useful pieces of advice you received?

**JW:** Kevin Huffman [Tennessee's chief] was one my bosses at Teach for America. Chris Cerf [chief in New Jersey] was my predecessor and my Deputy Chancellor in New York. [New York chief] John King was my longtime partner in New York State. So there are relationships that I come to and I work with. But the first superintendent that I went to see on a visit recently was [Indiana chief] Tony Bennett. And Tony said some really, really powerful things to me. One, he said, "Discipline yourself and don't overestimate what you can actually do to achieve change. Empower people locally to achieve change and hold them in high standards." And, secondly, he said, "That shouldn't stop you from getting out and carrying the message. And you should never be behind the desk. If you have something that you believe in, sell it, talk to people, take the criticism, and be out in the community."

**RH:** Last question. A year from now, how will you know whether your first year was a success?

**JW:** I am going to want to look, district to district, classroom to classroom, and even within our own organization at the state level, to see what we have going on in real terms. Does it have the potential to be catalytic for kids in schools?

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