



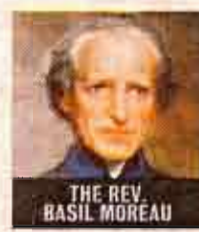
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# The Times-Picayune

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NEW ORLEANS EDITION

## Charter school wins one against company

*Lafayette Academy able to oust operator*

By Darran Simon  
Staff writer

The governing board of Lafayette Academy charter school emerged from legal arbitration Friday with a \$350,000 judgment against the for-profit company it hired to run the elementary campus.

The arbitrator further upheld the board's early termination of the company's five-year management agreement, the first such forcible removal of a contracted charter operator in the city's short history with widespread chartering of public schools. The board, however, will have to pay \$100,000 to Mosaica Education to terminate the agreement, as the contract mandates.

The arbitration represents a victory for Lafayette, an exist-

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## Different leaders already in place

LAFAYETTE, from A-1

ing public school on South Carrollton Avenue that converted to a charter after the flood, along with dozens of other city schools. Lafayette is now governed by the Choice Foundation — the nonprofit that holds the charter and fired Mosaica — and a new school leader, a former private school headmaster. Lafayette, authorized by the Recovery School District, is one of some 41 charters in New Orleans, a city where more than half of public school students attend charter schools. In this new charter-friendly world, the dispute gives an inside glimpse into how one school's board dealt with failures in the school's leadership. Under the hulking bureaucracy of the Orleans Parish School Board, resolving similar problems often became mired in a central bureaucracy or fractious board politics.

Lafayette's board, however, could take quick action to remedy the problem, said Jim Huger, a local businessman who founded Choice.

"This charter movement is an incredibly positive step for New Orleans, because there isn't a bureaucracy," he said. "Every school has a board like us. Every board is faced with the same operating problems, and every board uses its best innovation and its best efforts to solve these problems."

### Charter oversight critical

The dispute at Lafayette, however, also underscores the need for effective oversight of charter schools. Nationally, charter schools have proved as wonderful or horrible as the individual boards or companies managing them. And the state and local School Board have little experience in overseeing the independent schools and, so far, seem to have paid little attention to the task.

State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek recently created a "small but robust" charter oversight office working to support charters and keep them in line.

"I am a proponent of charter schools, and I am a supporter of charter schools, but I am also going to hold charter schools accountable," he said.

Though last year proved a struggle, Lafayette's leaders remain energized about the pros-

pect of new leadership this year.

"We're going to do the best possible job we can do with the students," said Jim Swanson, an attorney who handled the arbitration and also does legal work for The Times-Picayune. "We're not starting the year in a disorganized fashion, and the place is running like a school should run."

After repeated complaints, the board sought to end its association with Mosaica last spring and demanded the arbitration process, already laid out in its contract as an alternative to handling disputes in the court system. On Friday, an arbitrator upheld the July 1 termination of the management agreement.

According to Choice Foundation, the management company did not align the school's curriculum to state standards, which caused students to fail the state's high-stakes LEAP test, according to the foundation. Also, Mosaica didn't perform

routine assessments of students or create education plans tailored for each student. Mosaica further failed to properly organize transportation, officials said.

Mosaica also dragged its feet in establishing an after-school program for students below grade level, as were many of Lafayette's students, months after the board continuously raised the issue. Among other grievances, Mosaica kept the building filthy, according to the school's board.

Huger said that under Mosaica the school was supposed to "run like a well-oiled machine, almost like a franchise."

"They promised us an image of a school," he said. "That was the biggest undersell of the world."

### Problems pop up early

Mosaica, which was paid \$773,000 for the first year of its five-year contract, could not be reached for comment Friday.

Founded in 1997, Mosaica operates 90 charter school programs in eight states, the District of Columbia and the Middle East and serves more than 18,000 students. Lafayette is the only school Mosaica operates in Louisiana, according to its Web site.

Ten days into the school year, Lafayette's board started noticing problems, such as the school didn't have insurance and there weren't copy machines, Huger said.

"The academics weren't even being delivered, because they didn't have the basic things in place," Huger said.

Lafayette lost more than 20 teachers, and more than 200 students transferred at the end of the school year, Huger said. Choice now runs the school. Huger said the board also hired Mickey Landry, a former English teacher at Carver High School and headmaster of Christ Episcopal School in Covington. Landry, a New Orleans native, was most recently head-

master of The Colorado Springs School in Colorado Springs, Colo., a private college-preparatory institution.

"We have wonderful faculty members and a great administration who wants the best for these kids," said Landry, who came on board this summer.

The administration has already made strides and has connected with teachers and parents, Landry said. For example, he said, school leaders constantly pop into classrooms to support teachers, and the staff regularly greet school children in the mornings.

"They are passionate about what they do," Landry said of the staff.

Swanson, the board's vice chairman, said the school found Landry through a national search.

"He has brought a level of organization and sort of a methodical progress to the operation that we didn't have," Swanson said.

In preparing to launch a school after the 2005 storm season, Huger looked for a charter operator by calling friends in the charter school movement. Someone from the Center for Education Reform suggested Mosaica, said Huger.

Huger said the leadership change has made Lafayette a better school. Class sizes, which averaged about 25 students, now hover, on average, about 17-to-1, he said.

Two teachers now work in each fourth-grade classroom, a measure taken after about 45 students failed the high-stakes LEAP test, forcing them to repeat the grade, he said.

With one difficult year behind it, the Lafayette board has emerged wiser, Huger said.

"What we have learned is that the right school leader is absolutely critical," he said.

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