



Research on Reforms



**Deep South Center for Environmental Justice  
Public Policy Task Force**

**The False Promise of Reform of Post-Katrina  
Public Education in New Orleans**

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# Public Education Pre-Katrina

Educationally, New Orleans looked like any other urban city in America struggling to provide good learning environments for its large number of poor and minority students. Pre Hurricane Katrina the public school district had a two-tier system. There was a small cadre of schools (most of which had admission requirements) that provided a quality learning environment for its students, while the majority of schools provided a poor learning environment for the remaining students. With that, New Orleans had the highest and lowest performing schools in the state of Louisiana.

# HOPE

Despite the daunting task of recovering, we approached the re-building process with great optimism. We could finally *right the wrongs* we endured before Katrina. It didn't take long for us and the nation to realize that New Orleans had the once in a lifetime opportunity to create the model urban city for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With that, we had hopes of creating a public educational system that would finally produce a quality learning experience for all students. We understood that a good educational system has the largest impact on improving economic growth and decreasing crime. Equally as important, it would remove the *hopelessness that had become staple in many poor communities across New Orleans*.

# Was there a Recovery Plan for New Orleans?

On Sept. 7, 2005, the Heritage Foundation, perhaps the most influential conservative think tank in Washington D.C., released a memorandum on Gulf Coast recovery urging Congress to suspend the law requiring federal contractors to pay their workers the prevailing wage, repeal or waive portions of the Clean Air Act, eliminate or postpone various taxes and promote “new educational options,” including “charter schools, as well as private and religious schools.”

UTNO 2007

# Charter Conceptual Theory: Market Driven

A market-driven school system like New Orleans is based on the belief that consumer choice creates competition between schools.

The assumption is that parents will vote with their feet, leaving struggling, top-heavy, reform-resistant schools for the more nimble and innovative charters.

It's as if a public school system was no different than a community with lots of independent grocery shops, each promising the best prices and selection.

But public schools are *not* grocery stores, and public school students are not customers. They're children.

And no matter how many of them vote with their feet, some will always remain behind – by choice or by necessity. Our collective responsibility to them requires a model of educational service provision that is not *based* on the presumption of winners and losers, as a market-driven model is.

Dingerson 2007

# Dismantling of Public Education

I try to imagine myself as a privatizer. How would I proceed? If my objective were to dismantle public schools, I would begin by trying to discredit them. I would probably refer to them as “government” schools, hoping to tap into a vein of libertarian resentment. I would never miss an opportunity to sneer at researchers and teacher educators as out-of-touch “educationists.” Recognizing that it’s politically unwise to attack teachers, I would do so obliquely, bashing the unions to which most of them belong. Most important, if I had the power, I would ratchet up the number and difficulty of standardized tests that students had to take, in order that I could then point to the predictably pitiful results. I would then defy my opponents to defend the schools that had produced students who did so poorly.

Kohn 2004

# Education Officials Reform Plan

After Katrina state and local education officials decided to (without any public input) make all public schools in New Orleans Charter Schools. They stated that charter schools would solve the academic ills of our failing schools.

# Charter Schools

Charter schools differ from state to state, Louisiana is the only state that allows charter schools to have admission requirements. Most states charter schools follow federal guidelines which states charter schools must have “open enrollment”



# The Coup

In November 2005 Act 35 took over 107 schools from New Orleans Public Schools and stated that they were “failing”. Prior to ACT 35 there was a policy for school takeover, however in ACT 35 the state changed the rules (60 SPS to 87.4 SPS). If Louisiana officials had applied pre-Act 35 standards to Orleans Parish, the state could have assumed control of only **13** schools.

UTNO 2006

# The Reality of Reform in New Orleans

Despite media reports, public education in New Orleans is not doing better post-Hurricane Katrina. The “*experiment*” in New Orleans has a plethora of problems, which continue to foster a school district that does not offer an environment for quality education for poor and minority children. The charter schools in New Orleans that are, and have been, showcased in the media are those charter schools (magnet schools and/or city-wide access) that serve a student population of *academically gifted and talented students*.

# The Reality of Reform in New Orleans

Post Hurricane Katrina, *New Orleans is by and large a two-tier system that offers a quality education to students in selective charter schools (with academic admission requirements) and substandard learning environment for students in non-charter schools.* It should be noted that most of the students attending non-charter schools in the Recovery School District and are poor and minority students.

# Key Findings to the Failure

- Millions of federal dollars (NCLB funds) were designated for disadvantaged students in open admissions charter schools, but many of the funds have been distributed to charter schools that do not provide equal access.(violation of federal law).
- Federal funds (\$100 million) were awarded to the state of Louisiana immediately after Hurricane Katrina to assist with teacher's health insurance and salaries in parishes affected by Katrina, but the funds are still unaccounted for as all the teachers, bus drivers and paraprofessionals in New Orleans were *fired and not re-hired when schools re-opened in April 2006.*

# Key Findings to the Failure

- The Louisiana Department of Education awarded numerous questionable contracts post Hurricane Katrina, which included 55 million dollars to a school security firm and financial management firm for a twelve month period.
- Created charter schools with no comprehensive plan to meet the needs of all the students or a evaluation process for charter schools.
- There is no local input or community involvement or transparency in the Recovery School District (RSD) which services mostly poor and minority students.
- There is inadequate staffing at many RSD schools despite state and national standards.

# The Bottom Line

Once again, we have failed in developing a quality school district by not providing quality learning environments for *all* children, particularly poor and minority students.

We have to finally come to the conclusion that *only* educating our best and brightest is not an option. Our economic growth and quality of life is directly proportionate to our ability to educate *all* children, particularly our poor and minority students that make up the majority of our student population. How can we expect to prosper and flourish if the majority of our students are unprepared to participate in society?

# It's Not Always in the Numbers

***Not everything that counts can be measured, and not everything that can be measured, counts.”***

Albert Einstein