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The New Orleans Reformed Public School System: National Model?

Raynard Sanders

The New Orleans reformed public school system is being hailed as the national model for turning around urban school districts. The internationally televised devastation of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina attracted more than three billion dollars to rebuild the public schools and help students who were suffering in a failed locally elected school district. This massive influx of funds came from the philanthropic community, charter school proponents, foreign countries, and the federal government.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the public school system drastically changed when local and state education officials decided, without public input, to convert all public schools in New Orleans into charter schools. In November 2005, the Louisiana Department of Education successfully lobbied the state legislature to pass ACT 35, shrewdly crafted for schools just in New Orleans, which allowed it to take over 107 schools. In this legislation these 107 schools were identified as failing, despite the fact that many of them received awards for academic progress from the state department of education in May, 2005.

Within one school year after Act 35 was passed officials from the Louisiana Department of Education began boasting of “unprecedented” student performance on standardized tests and improved high school graduation rates as a result of creating a school choice system with the largest percentage of charter schools in the country. However this heralded success of the reformed New Orleans Public system plays out much differently when evaluated by external researchers and when observed on the ground. While critics of the reforms are commonly dismissed by state education officials as proponents of the failed local school district, the reality is that just a cursory examination of test scores released by the Louisiana State Department of Education tells a totally different story.

Pre-Hurricane Katrina 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 with a two-tier system. There was a small cadre of schools, most of which had admission requirements, that provided quality learning environments for students, while the majority provided poor learning environments for the remaining students. With that, New Orleans had the highest performing schools in the state of Louisiana; however, for the majority of our students, mostly poor and minority, the educational experience was less than adequate in school buildings that were grossly inadequate.

Now, six years after the hurricane, the state run schools in New Orleans have been cited by several external researchers as one of the lowest academically performing districts in Louisiana. In one study, Michael Deshotel (2011) found that the high poverty schools in New Orleans scored lower on the state mandated standardized test than the high poverty schools in numerous districts across Louisiana. It should be noted that none of these other districts were part of the educational reform model nor did

they receive the billions of dollars afforded the state run school district in New Orleans. The problems with the reformed district in New Orleans unfortunately extend beyond poor academic performance:

- The University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race and Poverty (2010) found that the rebuilding of the public school system in post-Katrina New Orleans produced a five “tiered” system of public schools in which not every student in the city receives the same quality education. This “tiered” system sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty non-charter schools.
- The Southern Poverty Law Center filed a class action suit against the state for operating charter schools that were not servicing or admitting students with special needs.
- The reformed school district has allowed charter schools to have full autonomy without accountability. It has revoked only one charter’s operator’s license despite widespread lack of performance. Last January the state department of education renewed the licenses of two charter schools that had recently received “D” and “F” ratings on academic performance. Meanwhile it closed non-charter schools for their lack of performance (Harper-Royal, 2010).
- Many charter schools are run like private schools by self-appointed boards without any parent, community, or teacher representation. One charter school board president resides outside the state. There is no transparency in charter school operations, finances or hiring while they receive public money and operate rent free in public school buildings. Charter school operators recently successfully lobbied the BESE Board (the state board that oversees public education) to allow a selective admission process and to exclude neighborhood students.

The education reforms in New Orleans for the past six years have not had all the obstacles that the reformers continually describe as a hindrance to improving public schools in America. With that New Orleans has provided the country with a valuable lesson about improving public education. The original legislation to create the reformed school district in New Orleans described the takeover of schools as an experiment. The New Orleans school system has been decentralized with no local elected board and no teachers’ unions with collective bargaining agreements; all the “supposedly” terrible teachers have been fired and replaced with Teach for America recent college graduates and the schools run by privately managed charter boards. The reformed school district in New Orleans proves, once and for all, that the public education privatizers and so-called reformers are WRONG.

The reality is that New Orleans is a national model, but not for success. It tells us what NOT to do with our schools and our most precious resource, “our children.”

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