

# Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms

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## Principals and Teachers --- And, the State Takeover

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The first activity in scientific research is forming a question about some phenomenon, such as, “Why were 102 New Orleans schools failing?” The second activity is forming a hypothesis concerning the question. The hypothesis proposes that something is true about the phenomenon. For example, the state hypothesized that principals and teachers were a primary cause of the problem of failing schools. The hypothesis is then tested by collecting and analyzing data.

The state might not have overtly asserted that the principals and teachers were the problem, but when they took over the 102 failing schools and fired all of the schools’ principals and teachers, their actions spoke louder than any words. Now, with two full years of data collection, and a new cadre of principals and teachers, the failing schools are still failing. The hypothesis is not true. Principals and teachers were never the source of the problem. If anything, they were its best solution.

## Experimentation

The Louisiana Legislature approved experimentation with the New Orleans public schools, with the caveat that experiment results be analyzed. (1) This experiment, better known as the State Takeover plan, as all experiments, began by proposing certain reasons for a phenomenon, *i.e.*, for the failure of the schools.

The State Takeover plan proposed that the failing schools were primarily the fault of the principals and teachers therein. (2) Principals and teachers were viewed to be responsible, thus replacing them would bring positive change. Now, the schools have operated for two full years, with a new cadre of principals and teachers, but without much improvement in test scores. Thus, the hypothesis that principals and teachers are a major cause of the problem is erroneous.

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## The Principal and Teacher Variable

In November 2005, the Louisiana Legislature and Governor Kathleen Blanco authorized the State Takeover legislation, placing 102 failing New Orleans public schools into the hands of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). (3) The schools were transferred to BESE, but BESE chose not to retain the principals and teachers. Thus, when the failing schools were moved to state control, the principals and teachers in those schools were not moved to state employment; instead, they were fired. State officials asserted interest in “attracting the best and the brightest” teachers and principals, thus, assuming that those previously in the schools did not fit that description. (4)

Many of the principals and teachers applied for positions in the state-run district. BESE purported that it would rehire many of them. But, by July 2006, just weeks before the opening of the 2006-07 year, the state had not offered jobs to any of the fired principals, and not a single teacher had been hired. (5) Eventually, many of the principals and

teachers were re-hired, but the disastrous effects on the lives of those who were caught in this reckless disregard for their worth cannot be fully emphasized.

Principals and teachers are not the source of the problem; they are the solution to the problem. Their recommendations and ideas remain voiceless at the highest decision-making level, the level at which the paradigm is set and the funds are allocated. They do not have the authority to make the major decisions, yet they are held accountable for the outcomes of those decisions.

There were numerous problems with the Orleans school district that accounted for the failure of so many schools; and, the problems did include many, but not all, of the principals and teachers. The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), through its policies, bears much responsibility for the continued employment of under-performing principals and teachers. BESE's cumbersome evaluation process makes it nearly impossible to remove incompetent principals and teachers. (6) Even after the myriad of forms, observations, improvement schedules and timelines have been met; the incompetent professional's last resort is an appeal to the local school board. Local school boards are not impartial, especially, those in school systems with unions that support board members in elections. Contrast the appeal process for a public school system employee with that of a public civil service employee. A civil service employee, found incompetent by his/her supervisor, appeals to an "administrative law judge." But, a school system employee appeals to the local school board. BESE never ventured to make the evaluation process more objective. BESE policies, under which school systems operate, contribute to the failure.

Consider, also, the decision of the State Takeover, which was authorized without principal, teacher, or community input. When the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education decided to "takeover" the failing New Orleans schools, they were choosing from one of several options available to state boards under the No Child Left Behind Act. (7)

Had principals and teachers been involved, they would probably have considered as more favorable one of the other options available to BESE. For example, another option was to replace the existing New Orleans school board with a board of professional teachers and principals. Previous school boards had documented problems of corruption, and the existing school board's problems with finances led the state to intervene. Imagine a board comprised of the business community and of professional educators. This was an option available to BESE that it did not choose.

## **The Data on Student Achievement**

After two full years (2006-07 and 2007-08), the takeover has not produced results. The Times-Picayune reported that schools operated by the state system continue to remain in crisis. (8) Of the seventeen (17) state-operated schools that opened in 2006-07, fifteen (15) of them received 2008 performance scores below the state minimum of 60. Thus, all of the RSD's schools, except two, have an "academically unacceptable" label, the same label that they had before the takeover.

Of the high schools that were a part of the state takeover, eight were reopened by 2007-08. The Graduate Exit Exam scores show that none of the schools improved test scores in all four subject areas. In three high schools, there was a smaller percentage of proficient students, in all four subject areas, than prior to the takeover. The GEE results indicate that the State Takeover has not been a successful intervention with regard to increasing the number of high school students who score at the proficiency level. (9)

## **The Importance of Research-Based Assumptions to Support the State Improvement Plan**

It is important to use research-based practices in the classrooms, and, it is equally as important to formulate hypotheses that are not counter to research findings. Hypotheses suggest the reason that events occur. The state hypothesized that principals and teachers were the primary cause of the problem, but this hypothesis has long been tested and dismissed as invalid.

The state's position that the quality of the teacher is the most important variable in the classroom is accurate. But, reworking that position, by assuming that the teachers and principals currently employed in the failing system are the source of the problem, is not accurate.

It is important to develop state plans with valid assumptions about how children learn and how schools improve. Incorporating assumptions that have already proven to be invalid is reckless. Experimenting with the lives of children and youth is vastly different

from experimenting with inanimate objects. There is a moral obligation to assure that education experiments are carefully constructed.

## Conclusion

When the State took over the 102 failing schools and fired the principals and teachers in those schools, the state assumed that those principals and teachers were a primary cause of the problem. This assumption has proven not to be valid as the takeover schools are still not progressing.

Principals and teachers were not involved in the selection of the State Takeover model. Obviously, since they were thought to be a part of the problem, their involvement was dismissed. The chasm between those who develop improvement plans and those who are held accountable for their results must be eliminated. Principals and teachers are not the cause of the problem; they are the solution to it. Involving them will lead to lasting improvements.

## Endnotes:

1. See La.R.S. 17:10.7; 17:1990 and 17:3971 *et seq.*
2. Times-Picayune, February 14, 2006, "30 Day Notice Needed Before They're Fired"
3. La. Legislative Act 35 of 2005 (Recovery School District Law)
4. Times-Picayune, July 3, 2006, "Bell's About to Ring"
5. *Ibid.*
6. Louisiana Department of Education Bulletin 1525: Guidelines for Personnel Evaluation
7. 20 U.S.C. 6311, Sec. 116(c)(10)(C)
8. Times-Picayune, Nov. 8, 2008, "Orleans Schools Show Mixed Results." See, also, DOE State/District/School Achievement Level Summary Reports

9. B. Ferguson, "State Takeover Not Working for New Orleans High Schools," October 2008, Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms

*The Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reforms was founded by Dr. Barbara Ferguson, Charles Hatfield and Dr. Raynard Sanders. For more information, visit [www.researchonreforms.org](http://www.researchonreforms.org).*