

The New Orleans Imperative: Quality Public Education for All Children

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Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, we were faced with the awesome task of rebuilding the essential components of a functional city: housing, medical facilities, police, fire and schools. The massive devastation from Katrina placed New Orleans in a position that no other city in America had ever experienced. This required us to search for answers where there was no roadmap. Despite this daunting task, 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 21st 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.

Pre-Hurricane 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.

Many of our schools won national recognition for their excellence in academics and the arts. But, for the majority of our students, mostly poor and minority, their educational experience was less than adequate in school buildings that were horrifying to say the least. Even though, as a school district, we stated that we wanted to educate *all* children and youth, in reality, we successfully educated only a small cadre of them.

The primary *mission of schools* is to prepare young people to make a meaningful contribution to their community, which will help maintain and enhance the quality of life. Effective education

means giving our young people the tools to successfully participate in society economically, socially, and politically. We are not accomplishing this if the majority of young people leave our schools unable to make that important contribution. Needless to say, the community's faith and hope in the New Orleans Public Schools was all but null and void.

Post-Hurricane Katrina

Following Hurricane Katrina, the public school system has drastically changed. Local and state education officials decided (without public input) to convert all of the public schools in New Orleans into charter schools. In November 2005, the Louisiana Department of Education took over 102 schools, claiming they were failing schools, despite giving most of them awards for academic progress in May 2005. In announcing this change, they stated that "charter schools would be the answer to all the ills of public education in New Orleans". This change has been labeled an "experiment" by state officials and national education experts.

However, after more than three years of this experiment in New Orleans, of creating the largest number of charter schools in the country, our public school district looks much like it did pre-Hurricane Katrina. We have a few schools doing a wonderful job, but still most of our students in our high schools, charter or non-charter, are not achieving proficiency on the state mandated LEAP test (Ferguson, 2008). Only four of our twenty three high schools are scoring at pre-Hurricane Katrina levels. In essence we have *recreated* the two-tier system that failed the majority of our students.

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. To put it in perspective, Louisiana is the only state in the country that allows charter schools to have student admission requirements. With that, the charters in New Orleans are different from other charters across the country, which serve a regular student population, or a group of students who have problems in traditional schools. 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*.

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.

The post-Katrina failure can be narrowed down to the following:

- 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*.
- 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.
- Many charter schools have failed to enroll special-needs children as required by federal law.
- 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. By and large, the charter schools that are providing quality learning experiences post-Hurricane Katrina are the same city-wide access and/or magnet schools that were doing a great job pre-Hurricane Katrina.

All citizens in New Orleans need to hold education officials accountable for educating *all* children. 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?

Dr. Raynard Sanders, February 2009

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.