

A large, diverse group of young students, likely in a classroom, are shown from the chest up. They are looking towards the camera with various expressions. The students are of various ethnicities and ages, ranging from young children to teenagers. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the students in the foreground. The overall tone is positive and educational.

OUTCOMES OF THE STATE TAKEOVER OF **NEW ORLEANS** SCHOOLS

Dr. Barbara Ferguson

OUTCOMES OF THE STATE TAKEOVER OF NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS

By: Dr. Barbara Ferguson

Introduction

In 2005 the Louisiana education board took-over 107 of New Orleans' 120 schoolsⁱ because they had performance scores below the state average. They were placed into the state's Recovery School District, which continues to have a performance score below the state average.

The Recovery School District attempted to charter all schools taken-over. While this did not happen, most did reopen as charter schools. And most of the schools that were not taken-over converted into charter schools also.

Louisiana is unique in that it allows its charter schools to have selective admission and retention criteria. The failing schools had to retain at-risk students, only expelling those who committed egregious offenses, such as drug and weapons violations. The charter schools do not have to retain at-risk students. They can expel students for misbehaviors for which the students could not have been previously expelled. And they can permanently remove students without expelling them, which is an option that was not available to the failing schools. Thus, the charter schools can selectively retain only well-behaved students.

In addition to the charter schools that replaced the failing schools, there were charter schools that replaced the successful schools that were not taken-over. The schools not taken-over were the magnet schools with selective admission and retention criteria, which criteria were retained after being converted into charter schools. They continue to be successful.

Researchers report that the New Orleans charter schools are performing well, and this is so. But whether the charter schools that replaced the failing schools are performing better than the schools they replaced is still an unanswered question. No research entity has factored into its design the variable of selection. Charter schools develop their own criteria for expulsion, thereby selectively retaining well-behaved students, and they develop rules for permanently removing students without expulsion, an option that was not available to the prior failing schools. Thus, for

researchers to analyze the pre- and post-takeover schools as if the only change were in governance constitutes a significant flaw in the research design. Only when the charter schools are mandated to retain the same at-risk students as the schools they replaced can the pre- and post-takeover schools be compared.

Selective schools historically outperform open admission schools. The state takeover itself validates this well-established theory. New Orleans had selective schools before the takeover, and none of these schools were taken-over.

More important than research is the lost opportunity that charter schools, as originally envisioned, could have provided. Charter schools were created as alternatives to traditional schools, not to replace traditional schools. Instead of continuing under the same centralized paradigm, the idea was to let teachers, instead of the central office, decide how to operate those schools with large numbers of at-risk, failing students. This original charter school concept envisioned teachers as the instruments to innovate schooling. However, rather than teachers as the charter operators, the charter operators in New Orleans are primarily charter management groups who improve school performance by eliminating the very at-risk students that charter schools are intended to serve.

Charter schools, whether selective or not, have gained the attention and favor of most in the city. It was well time for a shake-up of the New Orleans school system, which was continually beleaguered with academic and financial problems. It is time now to turn to those who have not benefited from the state takeover. Such students notably are in high poverty areas and are not in the selective charter schools. It is time now to build on the successes of the takeover and to move forward in developing a school system grounded in sound educational theory and research that embraces all children and youth.

ⁱ The total of 120 New Orleans schools does not include the six schools that served as alternative centers or juvenile detention centers.