

Why the Education Reforms in New Orleans Failed and Will Never Work

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According to national media, the education reforms of the New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) have turned around failing urban schools; however, the reforms have been a nightmare for the very children whom they were to benefit.

Post-Hurricane Katrina the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) took over more than 107 public schools in New Orleans claiming that they were failing. Post –Katrina Education Reform has drastically rebuilt the public education system into practically an all charter system creating the largest percentage of charter schools than any city in the country. In developing reforms to rebuild New Orleans public schools, the state attracted more than three billion dollars from the philanthropic community, charter school proponents, foreign countries and the federal government. Over the last six years, numerous reports have been written citing the RSD with unprecedented success while proclaiming it as the national model for turning around urban school districts. Despite these reports of the miracles in New Orleans, the reality is that the reform school district in New Orleans (Recovery School District) is one of the worst performing school districts in the state of Louisiana. In its recent assessment, the Louisiana State Department of Education ranked the Recovery School District academically 69th out of 70 school districts in Louisiana. Despite the billions of dollars, despite all of the media spin, and despite claims from state education officials, *the education reforms in New Orleans have failed* (Deshotels).

Ironically, the obvious changes in the public education landscape that the reformers said were needed (market approach to public education system, charter schools and school choice) are not the reason for this failure. The reason for the failure is more deeply rooted in New Orleans' history where its leadership, by policy and practice, reflected a narrow-minded commitment to separate and unequal schools. Many in New Orleans seem to cling to the belief that New Orleans should not provide quality education to all children regardless of race and class. Unfortunately, much of the leadership in New Orleans and the state of Louisiana believe that inequity is the foundation on which our public education should be built. The leaders who support this kind of thinking are so intoxicated with their ignorance and blindness that they have no problem in providing unequal funding and inadequate facilities for the children they have determined as less desirable. In the present education reforms, the LDE has quietly disenfranchised them from the public education process.

The author David McCullough stated that “history is who we are and why we are the way we are.” When you look at New Orleans history it helps us to understand New Orleans’ unconditional historic commitment to inequity; this belief has been a part of the practice of public education for years. In a 1902 report written to New Orleans Public Schools Superintendent Warren Easton, Assistant Superintendent Nicholas Bauer clearly explains New Orleans historic commitment to inequity:

...to teach the negro is a different problem. His natural ability is that of low character and it is possible to bring him to a certain level beyond which it is impossible to carry him. That point is the fifth grade of our schools (Bauer Report).

While this statement may be startling to some, it characterizes the senseless logic for creating unequal schools for African American children who have been labeled as uneducable or undesirable. When Assistant Superintendent Bauer specifically referred to race to justify the school district’s bias, the politically correct identification of the undesirable student in 2012 has expanded to race and class. Over the years the goals of education have been rewritten to include educating all children. However, while Louisiana has written about equity, we continue to ascribe to the original dictate of 1902.

Continuing to ascribe to these kinds of beliefs and practices has resulted in the age-old fight of access to quality education for all children, and has created the environment that provided substandard education to generations of children. That fight is going on today as parents of special needs children filed a class action lawsuit through the Southern Poverty Law Center against the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) for allowing charter schools to deny access to their children. It is this kind of thinking that allows state officials to defy the No Child Left Behind federal policy by not offering school choice to the thousands of students in failing schools to attend passing schools. It is this kind of thinking that allows state officials to deny students access to neighborhood charter schools because the students do not meet the charter schools’ admission standards.

A report written in 2010 by the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race and Poverty states that rebuilding of the public school system in post-Katrina New Orleans has produced a five “tiered” system of public schools in which not every student in the city receives the same quality education. The “tiered” system of public schools in the city of New Orleans 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 (IRP).

Dr. Kristen Buras, Professor at Georgia State University, wrote an article for the Harvard Education Review in 2011 entitled: *Race, Charter Schools and Conscious Capitalism: On the Spatial Politics of Whiteness as Property (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)*. In this article, she argues that:

New Orleans charters are less about responding to the needs of racially oppressed communities and more about reconstruction of the new newly governed South - one in which white entrepreneurs (with black allies) capitalize on black schools and neighborhoods by obtaining public monies to build and manage charter schools (Buras).

The education reforms in New Orleans have boldly reestablished the Separate and Unequal school system, which ironically is defined as a good school system. However, the LDE cannot seem to understand, or it refuses to understand, that good school systems provide an equal opportunity for *all* children to learn in an *optimum* learning environment. Good school systems do not put five and six year old children on school buses for a three to four hour bus ride to and from school while passing up dozens of charter schools that they cannot enter because they do not meet their admission requirements. **Good school systems vigorously practice excellence for all schools; they do not extend the contracts or give more schools to failing charter schools.** Good school systems use equity and excellence as the standard for making all decisions. Good school systems do not sacrifice equity and excellence for narrow minded thinking around race and class. Good school systems, most importantly, understand that you cannot have excellence schools without equitable schools; one cannot exist without the other.

The systemic changes needed to create a quality education for all children will never happen in New Orleans until the current leadership overcomes the biases of race and class that have historically kept our city from moving forward.

Endnotes

Bauer, Nicholas, *Annual Report to Superintendent Warren Easton*, 1902.

Buras, Kristen, *Race, Charter Schools, and Conscious Capitalism on the Spatial Politics on Whiteness as Poverty (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)*, *Harvard Educational Review*, Summer 2011.

Deshotels, Mike, *White: Charters Are the Answer*, *Louisiana Educator*, 2011.

Institute on Race and Poverty, *The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity*, University Of Minnesota law School, 2010.