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“Build a School, Rebuild a City”

An economic examination of the re-structured education system in New Orleans, 10 years after
Hurricane Katrina

Brianna Lazarchik

EC 499 Final Paper

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Abstract: The city could have died. But it didn't. Though the damage to the city of New Orleans in 2005 was devastating in ways that shocked the nation ten years ago, its culture and people are alive and thriving today. The depth of passion in New Orleans motivated and inspired individuals to move back to the city quickly and restore its glory. However, such rapid restoration is not without vast socioeconomic challenges. Education is a vital component of any thriving social system, and the education system in New Orleans has rebuilt itself in a unique way: largely through charter schools. This ten-year mission of deeply contemplating how best to educate children shows how economic development, privatization, and consumer choice change the landscape of primary and secondary education in a way unmatched by any other school reform movements in the country, due to the state of the school system pre- and post-Katrina. Referred to by some as, “the greatest experiment in the history of American education,” (*Rebirth*) post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrates the social and economic issues that are integral factors in shaping a nation's education system.

I. Introduction

“People have finally realized economic tragedy is fueled, in part, by the failure of public schools to operate and function. It’s time for us to get off our dead asses and do something about it.”

Paul Pastorek, Louisiana State Superintendent of Education 2007-2011 (*Rebirth*)

Educating a population is no small task. It is a daunting burden to nations and cities across the globe that face great challenges to economic development. Education and prosperity are closely interwoven into the fabric of human capital that covers our nation, and one simply cannot occur without the other. The economic implications of emphasizing education can present giant obstacles, especially since education’s strong ties to human capital lead to a massive diversity of opinion on how “best” to educate a population. Each population across the globe faces different challenges, cultures, and needs, but the importance of education to society as a whole is undeniable.

In Southern Louisiana in August of 2005, a levee overflowed and funds ran dry, and one community found a “blank slate,” at the moment when they needed it the most. Innovation, creativity, and turning to outside sources, led the charge of education reform in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Ten years later, the lessons in economic development that have emerged from the city’s efforts to recreate educational opportunities uncover significant hurdles as well as triumphs in the way we educate our children. This is America. Ten years have passed. Astonishingly, however, the city still faces great challenges, and a sometimes painful degree of uncertainty as New Orleans, its economy, and its infrastructure continue to feel the effects of Katrina that lie far below its shining exterior of jazz and gumbo. Education was a key component in the redevelopment of the Big Easy, and the struggles of the system to get back on its feet can

help illuminate why the city itself has faced challenges that parallel developing nations over the years.

II. Economic Theory

Hurricane Katrina provides a case study by which we can understand economic development in the United States. The importance of improving human capital through education is a relatively new subset of economic development theory, but such theories lay an important foundation for examining how and why the education system in New Orleans rebuilt in the way that it did. A review of the literature surrounding education and growth theory illuminates a variety of perspectives that, some more strongly than others, point to the important link between education and economic growth. The basic means by which growth and education are compared, on a global level, is to use GDP growth regressions expressed as a function of various measures of schooling: schooling included as one of many variables important to economic growth (Hanushek, 4). The Bureau of Labor Statistics most commonly uses the positive correlation between labor quality growth (as improved by education) and U.S. productivity growth (You, 95). These findings do show a correlation, but many economists continue to more deeply explore the internal variables present in this correlation.

Hye Me-You, an economist at SUNY Buffalo, examined school quality specifically as a factor in the growth of the quality of human capital. You's findings indicated that in the 0.4% increase in U.S. labor quality between 1967 and 2000, one-fifth of this could be explained by the growth in school quality, and total labor quality growth explained one quarter of U.S. labor productivity growth (You, 95). Eric Hanushek examines the relationship between a rise in cognitive skills and economic growth, concluding that there is indeed a positive causal relationship between the two factors (Hanushek, 2).

Worth noting is the significant challenge to using human capital-related measures as economic terms. All people possess and gain a different skill set and set of abilities, which can create discrepancies in outcomes. When people are encouraged to explore and capitalize on their talents, a natural division will become evident; thus, it could be argued that education increases inequality. However, some degree of inequality does characterize a successful capitalist system; a stagnant society ultimately does not serve its people. It is the painful paradox of successful economies; relevant in continued consideration of this issue.

A piece of the big picture is illustrated on a microeconomic level. The wage-schooling locus (see Figure 1, (Borjas, 242)) is

a model that illustrates how one worker's wage will increase based on the years of schooling he receives. This model shows that there exists diminishing marginal returns to education, where the increase in income becomes smaller and smaller as the worker's years of

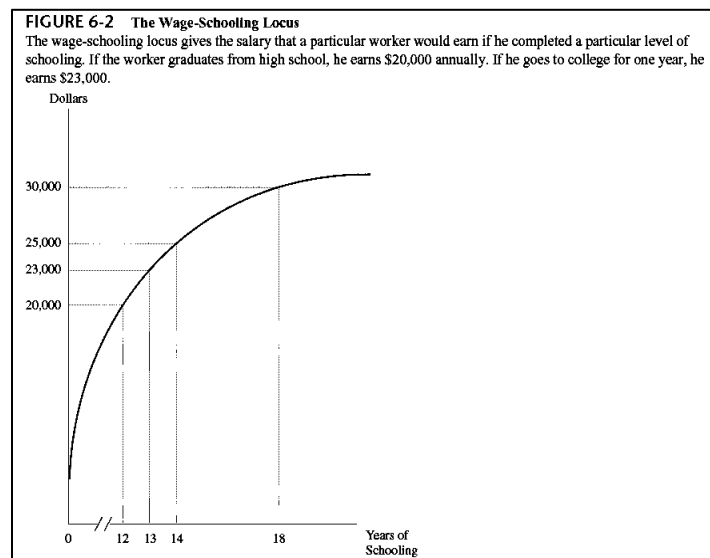


Figure 1

education increase. However, this model demonstrates an important commentary on the impact of education. Placing workers in the initial bracket of 0-12 years of education is where they will see the greatest returns to education, and stand much more closely to those who have 12+ years of education. The existing need is to enable populations as a whole to place more and more people in the first sector of the graph that makes the difference. This portion of the graph justifies the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015. This portion of the

graph proves that for every individual that receives a fundamental education, the returns will soar: both to the individual and to the nation. This portion of the graph underscores just how important it was for the city of New Orleans to provide quality educational opportunities for its students as quickly, but carefully, as possible.

III. Pre-Katrina New Orleans

New Orleans was in decline for several decades leading up to Hurricane Katrina. The region's economic stability depended on its status as a port city, but its most represented industries among the declining population were entertainment and transportation. Slow population decline and an absence of rising "knowledge" industries (Vigdor, 140) in New Orleans were major factors in the city's inability to move away from reliance on their status as a port city, and prohibited them from continuing on a trajectory of urban growth. The economic challenges surrounding education, rooted in demographic shifts and financial challenges, no doubt were a factor in the city's demise as well.

Since the mid-1960s, New Orleans experienced national attention regarding the integration of schools, including the famous story of Ruby Bridges. A young African-American girl attended McDonogh No. 19 Elementary School entirely alone for a year, since the parents of the school's white students boycotted the integration and removed their children from the school. Never again was McDonogh a majority white school, and racial dynamics continued to rapidly shift in schools such as these. New Orleans was implementing "grade per year" integration plans, but as schools became more integrated into the 1960s, the city experienced white flight. White families slowly moved out of the city largely due to their rejection of integration, and by 2005, more than 80 percent of students in New Orleans' public schools were African American (Rasheed, 6). Thus, the identity of the city as a dominantly African American city was

established. Education is a powerful force in shaping the demographic landscape of a city. New Orleans' demographics continued to shift and struggle as racial migration and the rise of the tourism industry shaped the economy and the people the city served.

On the brink of Katrina, in mid-2005, New Orleans was among the cities in the United States with the highest percentage of African-Americans. 93.5% of the city's 64,920 students were African American, and 77% of those students qualified for free and reduced lunch programs (Frazier-Anderson, 413). Louisiana eighth graders finished 45th out of 50 states in both national math and reading exams in 2003. Student achievement in New Orleans schools (and statewide) was alarmingly low. In the 2004-2005 school year, though spending per pupil was almost exactly on par with the state average, dropout rates in New Orleans were 11.2% versus 7.4%

statewide, based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards, 36.5 reading proficient compared to state average of 58, and 37.8/59.5 for math.

Only 26.7% of

economically disadvantaged students were proficient in reading and math under NCLB compared to a state average of 47.7% (Bleckley and Hall, 218). Schools run by the Orleans

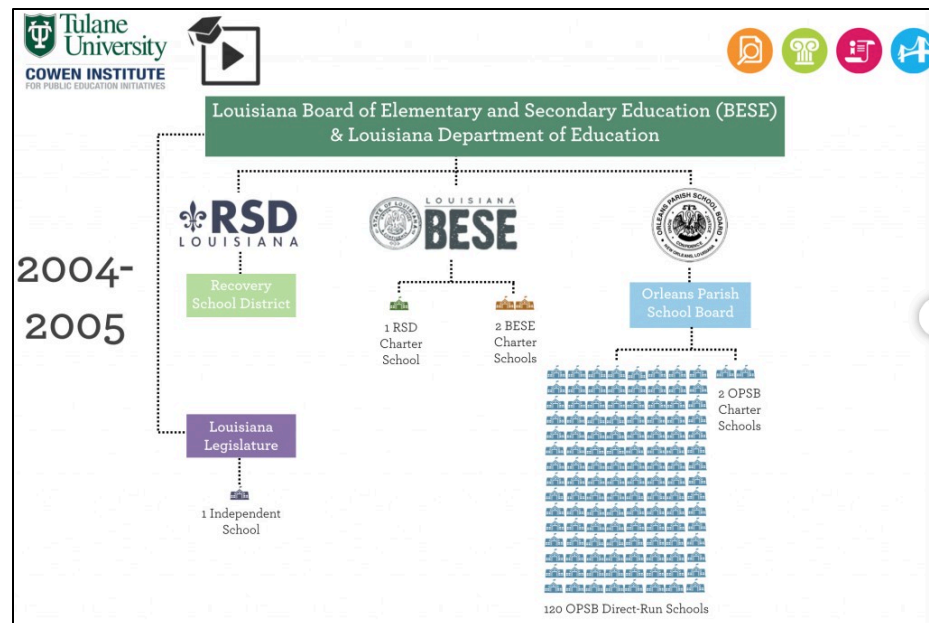


Figure 2

Parish School Board were essentially the only public option for the children of New Orleans (see Figure 2), and this organization was barely keeping itself afloat.

In 2004, 24 employees were indicted for financial mismanagement by a federally mandated audit, and the district faced bankruptcy as a result (Agemy, 235). The city's own citizens viewed the school system as a last resort. The schools were plagued by serious financial issues in addition to academic struggles, and the fraud and corruption served as nothing but an obvious diversion from the priority on positive student experiences and success that education systems should be persistently devoting resources to. Superintendents and school management could not focus on student experiences when dealing with federal investigations of their disastrous school system.

Such challenges did not go unnoticed by the state, and the Recovery School District (RSD) was created as a means of state intervention to hopefully help reform some of the city's most challenged schools. However, factors such as dilapidated buildings and high student turnover, combined with state intervention and the already-existing financial disaster, were factors already known to threaten the survival of an impoverished school system (Frazier-Anderson, 412). Families as a whole were lacking in the human capital department: one-quarter of New Orleans citizens lacked a high school degree, and 40 percent of adults were literate only at an elementary level (Agemy, 235). Education, of course, could help these families overcome their human capital deficit and develop in a more positive direction, but the system these families and children trusted to provide education was, tragically in terrible academic, financial, and physical shape (Frank). This human capital gap, combined with the existing socioeconomic decline in New Orleans, was a loud cry for help and a dark omen for things to come if change did not find its way into the city.

IV. Immediacy, Haste, and Hope

In August of 2005, New Orleans was hit by one of the worst natural disasters in American history. The flood left dizzying turmoil in its wake, exposed national issues in disaster response, and left piles of socioeconomic issues floating in plain sight. Some go so far as to say that, “the magnitude of destruction attributed to man-made error that occurred after Katrina was unmatched in U.S. history” (Frazier-Anderson, 413). One of the biggest struggles that nations and cities face when trying to improve economic conditions is the fact that many poor economies become trapped within failing institutions in ways that disable them from moving forward (Sachs, 56). It’s nearly impossible to wipe away problematic institutions entirely, so economic development often happens through smaller means that are not always effective. Though tragic natural disasters are never desirable and present their own serious economic problems, Hurricane Katrina was likely a force that saved New Orleans from such developmental gridlock, not only with their education system, but citywide. The city became a unique case study that seized the imagination of many. National think tanks declared “a flooded New Orleans to be a blank slate for a laundry list of long-targeted national reforms,” (Akers, 30) and especially those within the education system were seized by a unique thrill. A measured attitude of hope and inspiration almost immediately pervaded the city.

Mary Laurie, principal of O. Perry Walker High School before and after the storm, agreed to take over Walker without even thinking twice, ready to commit to a more promising future for New Orleans (Carr, 67-69). Many simply said, “we got lucky” (*Rebirth*). There was obvious energy toward the chance to act on what the people of New Orleans had previously only dreamed of. Many believed that New Orleans could, for the first time, be a national model for education, and answer previously unexplored questions regarding the best way to educate

children (Frank). Previously weighed down and bound by horrific issues that wholly diverted attention from a true and honest betterment of educational circumstances for the city's students, New Orleans educators and officials knew that as the people struggled to rebuild their lives, they needed a strong and stable public school system, one that gave them "reasons to believe that tomorrow can be better than today" (Stelly, 24). The people of New Orleans were hurt and suffering, but, ironically, having their world washed away from them kept them looking for hope at every turn. I might argue that it is only the unique combination of passion, optimism, and opportunity present in the city of New Orleans that enabled the city and its residents to take action toward a brighter future so quickly.

President Bush, as the city slowly stepped back onto its feet, declared that, "families can't move back unless there's schools for the kids" (Stelly, 25). The importance of education to economic growth was implicit in this demand. In 2006, *USA TODAY* explained that, "if we can give people a reason to be hopeful that those schools are going to be totally different from what they were before, that's a tremendous selling point for those who were displaced" (Frank). This was where the sense of urgency began. In most cases, a lack of schools would keep families out of the city. However, the love for New Orleans present in its people brought them quickly back, with little mind paid to the current economic state. Prior to Katrina, the city's population was 455,208, but less than one year later the population was 208,548 (US Census Bureau). The city's "strong pull on its residents and former residents," (Machtinger, 1) began a hasty restoration process wrought with challenges.

Optimism, however prevalent, was measured. A document issued by teachers in 2006 demanded that, "building a high-quality school system in New Orleans will take commitment, courage, and an open and honest dialogue" (Stelly, 24). Kate Mehok, a leading force in the re-

opening of Tubman Charter School, who co-founded and serves as CEO of the Crescent City Schools charter organization, found hope in the past as a driving power for the future, saying that, “people have probably been blaming other people for years, and that’s why we have [faced problems in the past]” (*Rebirth*). A sense of accountability and responsibility ran deep in the veins of New Orleans’ motivated educators: a key component of successful economic development, no matter what the circumstance.

V. Logistical Framework

Only 20 school buildings out of the 120 run by the Orleans Parish School Board remained usable (Bleckley and Hall, 219), and 65,000 students and 7,500 teachers were displaced by the hurricane (Agemy, 235). The quick action required by the recovery demanded that educators be “flying, designing, and building the plane simultaneously” (*Rebirth*). What happened was an almost immediate turn to charter schools as a mechanism for beginning reconstruction. Charter schools, despite mixed national reviews, were seen by some as fairly financially lucrative and expedient ways of re-opening schools (Stelly, 25) especially in a city with a now-destroyed tax base, and immediately grasped the imagination of many education officials. Additionally, there surely was an appeal in charter management organizations with pre-set philosophies and resources in order to open schools.

In November 2005, Louisiana State Act 35 followed up with the initial authorization of the RSD to take over New Orleans schools before Katrina, revised the definition of “failing” in order to expand the authority of the Recovery School District to take over failing schools. This legislation was said to target New Orleans, for it placed 90 percent of city’s failing schools under the RSD (Stelly, 25 and Bleckley, 219). Implicit perhaps it may be that as charter schools were slowly becoming the answer of the moment, the state seemed to tacitly push for them anyway.

The United States Department of Education awarded \$20.9 million to the state to fix damaged charter schools and to create new schools in the wake of Katrina (Bleckley and Hall, 221).

Columbia University professor Henry Levin explains the significance of designing a school district made up almost entirely of charter schools, and emphasized the multi-faceted approach that schools must take into account should they successfully work together within the context of an all-charter district (Levin, 341). The discussion of such a system has a prominent place in conversations regarding educational reform, and New Orleans was uniquely poised to take on such an experiment with almost 100% dedication. At the time, only 2% of public school students across the country were educated in charter schools in 40 states and DC (Frank). Charter schools weren't doing overly well; a large part of the problem was that it was "too easy" to get a charter, in New Orleans and elsewhere. Charters must be periodically renewed based on performance (Levin, 332). Charter schools competing among one another increases accountability and standards, and forces school operators to focus on positive and lasting outcomes for students. As discussed previously, school quality itself is also an element of positive economic growth, so a system focused on school quality fit well into the needs of New Orleans.

Under the careful scrutiny of new school management in New Orleans post-Katrina, charters could be ultimately rejected or revoked, and thus only small numbers of charters were approved as the education system re-shaped. Post-Katrina schools had 5 years to meet goals set by the overseeing organizations, and in this time, seven charters were revoked, and some schools were turned over to more qualified charter operators, including Harriet Tubman Charter, operated as a member of Crescent City Schools, after the previous operators failed to bring the

school up to par (*Rebirth*). Operators inherited the facility, but not the students, so establishment and promotion of a successful school in order to attract students was consistently a priority.

However, insisting on quality led to a shortage. Families were moving back to the city more quickly than schools could open. Demand was high, but supply was low and still only in the process of figuring out how to truly go higher in a sustainable way. By September 2006, schools were accommodating only about 22,000 students, but that was expected to increase to about 34,000 by January 2007. Students were “left with no choice but to attend the RSD’s non-selective schools because nearly all charter schools are full and turning away students” (Stelly, 24). Overcrowding was only the beginning. The school system is still trying to return to pre-Katrina capacity, but is heavily diversified under a variety of governing authorities.

Economically speaking, diversification in any industry and an increase of options for consumers is typically a positive force in economic development, but, especially initially, the unfolding of this diversification proved to be a challenge in progress.

Only a small handful schools under the former Orleans Parish School district retained traditional public school status under a publicly funded school board. The remainder of the schools were managed by a the Recovery School District and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in addition to the OPSB, and under each of these organizations were both state and direct-run schools. By the 2013-2014 school year, twenty schools were operated by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), fourteen of which were charter schools. The Louisiana Board of Secondary Education (BESE), which, prior to Katrina, only managed three schools, now oversaw 57 charter schools, and directly ran four (see Figure 3). The Recovery School District was also directly running five schools. Eighty-seven schools, by 2013, were under state control. Joshua Akers, published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional*

Research, acknowledges that, “prior efforts to undermine public education at the state and municipal level were key to the velocity and

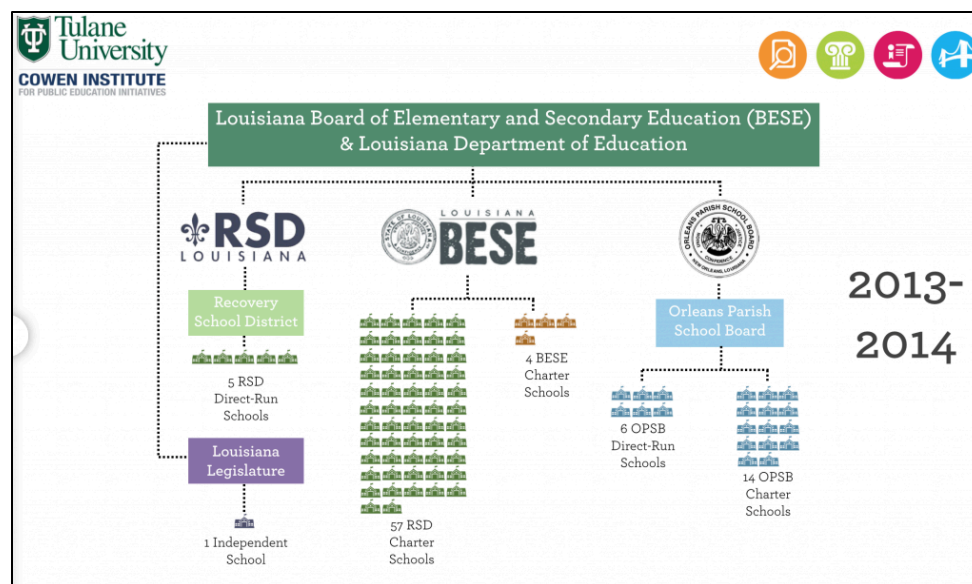


Figure 3

scope of the subsequent changes in New Orleans” (Akers, 29). Diversification of school management was a key player in the changing landscape of the education system, creating both decentralization and competition. Linda Johnson, president of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, called the emerging system, “the most free-market public education system in the country” (Bleckley and Hall, 221).

VI. An “educational marketplace”

As the system developed, the “educational marketplace” (Frazier-Anderson, 417) really took shape. Parents would attend a “schools expo” prior to each year, where they would essentially shop among public, traditional, and charter schools and compare schools on the basis of such criteria as academics, extracurricular activities, length of school day, and other student services (*Rebirth*). Schools used various marketing strategies and presentations of their mission and vision in the hope of captivating parents. This system requires “parents to act as consumers while exposing their children’s future to the whims of the marketplace” (Akers, 29), and thus creates a system where competition thrives, and command and control systems that previously

dominated are nowhere to be found. Levin cites a centralized means of access to information for all families, especially those who may have access to limited information and transportation otherwise, as a key to promoting an equitable and fairly competitive system (Levin, 334).

Jeb Bleckley and Joshua Hall describe the type of competition present in this school system as “pickax competition,” a type of competition that harnesses the intrinsic motivations of individuals to effect change through entrepreneurial minds (224). This perfectly captures the means by which schools began to rise in New Orleans, and books such as Daron Acemoglu and James Robinsons’ *Why Nations Fail* explain how entrepreneurship is proven to be a successful key to economic development as well. Bleckley and Hall also acknowledge that due to the nature of the education market, this is not an instance of perfect competition, for “the amount each charter school receives per student is determined by politics, not consumer demand, and is fixed per pupil,” continuing on to say that market prices are a key factor in assessing and planning within a given market (226). Though perhaps not a traditional market, non-financial factors are still very useful in understanding consumer choice and demand within this system.

Urban economic theory suggests that school quality and high test scores are strong factors in influencing the decisions of families to locate in certain areas (Bleckley and Hall, 223). While this has encouraging implications that serve as motivation for charter schools to perform well in order to be successful, it seems as though New Orleans families have different priorities. In early 2015, NPR released a report revealing what the educational consumers of New Orleans truly prefer for their education:

The study split families up into thirds based on the median income in their census tract. What they found was that the lowest-income New Orleans families were even more likely to pick schools that were close by, that offered extended days,

and that had football and band in high school — and, conversely, they had a weaker preference for schools based on test scores.”(Kamenetz, 2015)

This revealed preference from families, while it makes a lot of sense, creates an interesting disjointedness. In order to remain open, charter schools especially must meet certain standards, a lot of which are measured in the form of test scores and other state achievement standards. This priority on test scores and a positive educational environment in schools that have just open may imply that extra-curricular activities will initially fall by the wayside in schools that do not yet have the resources to provide them. Consumers are entitled to exercise their preferences, but this is yet another example about how working directly with human capital is incredibly challenging in an economic sense, when competing interests abound.

Paul Pastorek, State Superintendent of Education at the time, asserted that this system was “how public schools should operate in the 21st century” (*Rebirth*). His blended approach to how to handle education: asserting the rights of children over institutions, alongside a belief that “traditional and charter public schools can and will be the backbone of our schools,” (Bleckley and Hall 222) came to define the new system in New Orleans. However, the uncertainty continued to deepen. The 2014 State of Public Education in New Orleans (SPENO) report commented that, “although many schools appreciated the autonomy afforded to them in the enrollment decision-making process, they were faced with many uncertainties. For example, if a student received acceptance to more than one school, there was no formal mechanism for accepting or refusing his/her seat.” This wave of freedom, autonomy, and choice for both families and schools was an exercise in capitalism with implications still to be fully uncovered.

VII. Challenges to Unity

From the moment they returned to the city, parents faced stress related to the education of their children. Though different than the previous, deep worry about a failing school system before the hurricane, they now faced a multitude of school governing organizations where school could start on a variety of dates throughout the late summer; there was no obligation among these organizations to communicate and coordinate general operations (Rasheed, 6). Parents knew very little about the outside organizations that were coming with plans to educate their children, and, though governing officials did their best to inform parents, Terry Baquet reporting for NOLA.com commented that “even though there is a Web site, what they need to realize is that the people in this city are still making a transition” (Baquet). An element of cultural sensitivity was vital to this circumstance—vital, yet almost entirely overlooked.

Independent schools and varied school governance, though suddenly beginning to look a lot like a free and competitive market, failed to create the degree of unity that was somewhat required given the nature of the market for a good such as education. There was no longer a central office, no consistent standards for discipline, or even a means of tracking dropouts and expulsions (*Rebirth*). Such challenges stirred up a lot of confusion that did not exist prior to the hurricane when the Orleans Parish School Board ran nearly all of the schools. Hurricane Katrina, while providing the school system itself a fresh start, did wash away some important elements vital to a strong start with the new system: “the school records of many students were lost, making it difficult to validate such information as grade levels or courses already taken in fulfillment of graduation requirements. The loss of school records also made it difficult to identify returning students who previously qualified for and were in need of special education services” (Frazier-Anderson, 415). Such a loss is difficult to overcome, and the consequences of

this loss still resonate through the system in some ways today. Regarding the possibility of a full-fledged “charter school district,” Levin reported in 2012 that discussions of such a formal move were still at a high level of abstraction (Levin, 333), reflecting the absence of unity in management of schools. Unity is key to moving forward with reform efforts in a sustainable way.

VIII. Looking Ahead

The two biggest challenges moving forward in the city, in addition to maintaining sustainable development and high standards, are addressing the needs of students with disabilities as well as a uniquely situated labor market. Both issues have been marked by significant lawsuits, and educational policymakers would do well to address these concerns actively, especially now that it has been ten years since Katrina, in order to further motivate progress. Such large-scale legal barriers threaten the development of stable infrastructure, challenge the state of affairs, and require officials to think even more innovatively when it comes to stabilizing a new education system.

Students were required to apply to schools they desired to attend. The organizations running the charter schools were independent and able to choose students fairly autonomously. Providers of services choosing their own consumers runs a lot of dangerous risks, and it is worth noting that Orleans Parish School Board charter operators generally had more ability to choose students than schools under the RSD and Board of Secondary Education (Bleckley and Hall, 225). The numbers, unfortunately, reflect this, for in 2013, the OPSB enrolled an average of seven percent students with disabilities, with RSD-run schools reporting an average of eleven percent (SPENO 2013, 4). Opponents of this method argue that “students must be able to choose

schools, rather than the schools being able to pick and choose students” and “there must be oversight and effective monitoring” (Machtinger, 2).

From an economic standpoint, Levin suggests a means of rationalizing a charter school’s possible decision to refuse disabled students, explaining that “virtually no charter school is likely to have the optimal enrollment numbers for each disability where program economies of scale will be realized” (Levin, 336). This is one danger of exposing education to the free market. When costs and competition rise to the forefront of a school’s decision-making structure, it is more difficult to maintain a perspective on social welfare and the greater good. No doubt the ensuing argument would be that certain schools would simply need to specialize in order to successfully adapt to students with specific needs but specializing the system entirely would be fairly unprecedented and require vast discussions about the purpose of education that will remain un-discussed at this time for the sake of brevity.

While it may be true that new charters did not have the resources and financials to accommodate special needs students seeking entry, since the schools were fairly new, the students turned away from the charter schools landed in the public schools which were subject to drastically diminishing funding. This resulted in schools such as Booker T. Washington becoming “alternative school[s] for overage and behaviorally challenged [students]” (*Rebirth*). Though promising that some educational institutions were devoting resources in the hopes of helping these students transition back into the traditional system, it is too uncertain at this time to know whether this is a truly efficient way of educating students.

A lawsuit filed initially in 2010 emerged as a result, alleging that special needs children in New Orleans were underserved and “illegally disciplined in the fractured landscape of charter schools” (Dreilinger). The Southern Poverty Law center, on behalf of the students with

disabilities, asserted that charter schools were capable of being innovative and accommodating to these students, and the lawsuit proved to be a wake-up call for the state (*Rebirth*). Yes, students with special needs are expensive. However, the self-interest that emerged in the competitive market of charter schools, where a battle for high test scores ensues and competing parties try to stay afloat, created inequality that did not exist before. The haste and oversight may prove to have severe consequences for educators, and again trap the state in a pattern of challenges that deter from the focus on student experience and achievement that should define primary and secondary education.

With the shift from a monopolized system to a more decentralized one, a huge shift in the labor market (teachers and other staff) resulted: a complete dissolution of the existing labor force and an outreach to other sources to bring fresh faces into a fresh system. Almost immediately after Katrina, the Recovery School District disbanded the existing teachers' union and placed all employees on temporary unpaid leave, so as to have a literal start from scratch (Carr, 61). It is understandable, though, in some ways, because having almost an entire school system wiped away made financially sustaining a teachers' union incredibly challenging. However, this action robbed local teachers of stability and plagued them with uncertainty in an environment that was already wrought with "disarray and confusion" (Stelly, 25). It also led to a class-action lawsuit claiming wrongful termination. The U.S. Supreme court dismissed the suit, but as of 2015 the teachers planned to appeal (Kamenetz).

While the legal struggles surrounding teachers' unions are a barrier to progress, economic evidence suggests that the actual lack of teachers' unions may turn out to be another unexpected chance for more open reform. A 2013 study by Johnathan Lott and Lawrence Kenny found that student proficiency rates in states with weak statewide teachers' unions were actually higher than

states with strong unions (Lott, 102). Their argument suggests that the collective bargaining of teachers interferes with an effective allocation of resources that provide the best outcome for students, citing the way teachers may use political influence to bring about education policy that most benefits them as teachers (Lott, 94). In the case of New Orleans, the attitude among teachers is simply so different, due to the total diversity of teacher circumstances, forcing the teachers to see themselves as more loyal to the schools themselves than the self-interest backed by unions, which clearly has a positive effect. Erin Agemy credits “organization and loyalty [that] stems from a sense of pride and identification with their co-workers and school” (240) as a contributing factor to the success of schools, and such unity clearly works, allowing teachers to be successful and validated on a small, school level rather than an impersonal statewide one.

Another study by Benjamin Lindy found, during a four-year lapse in New Mexico’s collective bargaining laws (1999-2003), that mandatory collective bargaining increases SAT scores but also increases high school dropout rates (Lindy, 1135). In charter schools in cities like New Orleans, where impoverished populations face higher risks of dropping out, but innovative schools find ways of improving test scores that seem to be working, it seems consistent with Lindy’s findings that a lack of teachers’ unions is more beneficial for the education system in New Orleans. Proponents of teachers’ unions argue that improved teacher dignity and satisfaction as a result of the unions creates a better educational environment overall (Lindy, 1143). However, with charter schools, where each school has its own identity and teachers that work hard but truly believe in what they do, these effects are able to be attended to on a much more personal, and likely lasting, level. What better way to test out this economic theory than within a system that was able to start from the ground up?

The implications on a local and national level of this action heavily influenced the educational experience of students as well as the experience of teachers native to the city. What quickly accompanied the frustrated teachers native to the city was a wave of “imported” labor with the kind of fresh, optimistic energy found also in the operators and principals of the city’s shiny, new charter schools. These “young, white outsiders” were “idealistic but naive,” (*Rebirth*) sent to New Orleans by way of programs such as Teach for America. Placing the education of New Orleans’ children into the hands of these recent college graduates who very obviously raise questions about racial roles and the city’s ability to function autonomously was perhaps done initially out of necessity and creativity, but has continued to remain an integral part of the city’s educational landscape. There are more Teach for America teachers in New Orleans than any part of the country (Carr, 38), and in April 2007, the Recovery School District “announced federally funded financial initiatives for out of state teachers willing to relocate to New Orleans and teach for at least two years” (Frazier-Anderson 416).

It is too early to tell the impact that the Teach for America teachers and existing lack of unions will have on the city as reform continues, but thus far, the results do not seem to point in a discouraging direction.

IX. Conclusion

General economic theory surrounding Katrina recovery suggests the possibility of perhaps a new population equilibrium that, practically speaking, may be better suited to the economic circumstances of the city (Vigdor 135). A quality school system, even if it’s smaller, may not be a bad thing. The city may well flourish in the future in ways different than it has in the past. The best way the system can move forward at this point is by maintaining high standards of quality and addressing the challenges that have emerged over the past ten years.

Bleckley and Hall’s argument that, “while current school reforms are unlikely to change the education market in New Orleans enough for the city to return to its pre-Katrina size, they are helping considerably in the reconstruction process” (216) aligns with Vigdor’s notion and takes some of the pressure away from reformers—but only some. As of 2013, 43,000 students had already returned to the city’s school system (*Rebirth*). The 2013 State of Public Education in New Orleans report indicated that as of 2012, 84% of students were enrolled in charter schools, the highest percentage nationally—with Detroit in second place at 41% (SPENO, 8).

Despite some barriers, initial reporting seems positive. Early results in the immediate aftermath indicated that from 2007-2008, fourth grade test scores increased by twelve percentage points and eighth grade scores increased by four (Bleckley and Hall, 225). In that same year, the city saw a fourteen percent increase in population (US Census Bureau). 82% of students are now in free and reduced lunch programs (SPENO 2013, 10), a spike from the pre-Katrina level, but likely a consequence of general economic instability since the hurricane. According to the

Louisiana Department of Education, 63% of K-12 students in New Orleans were reported to be scoring basic or above across all standardized testing subjects in 2013, a number up from 48% in 2009. In

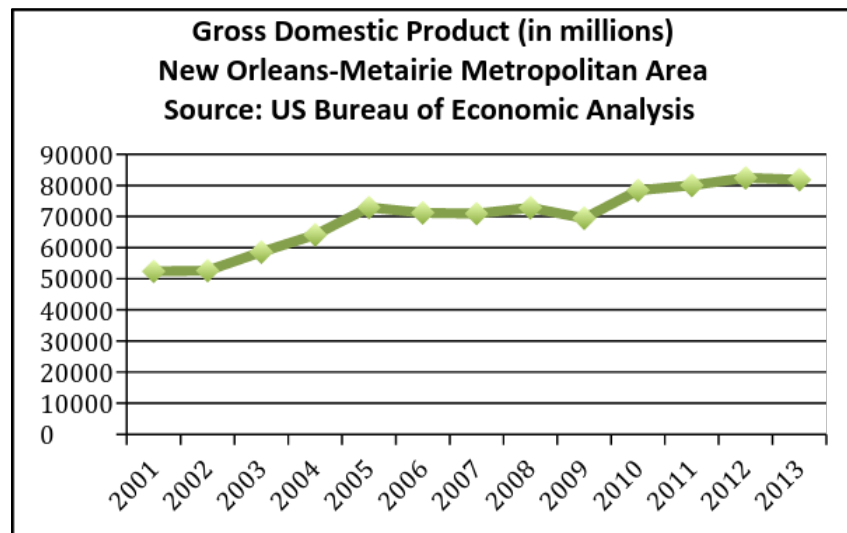


Figure 4

2011, the percentage of

African-American students passing state standardized tests (53 percent) exceeded the state

average (51 percent) (SPENO 2013, 23). These outcomes also align in accordance with what economic theory suggests regarding teachers' unions.

The current GDP for New Orleans well exceeds pre-Katrina levels already (see Figure 4), and the positive work of the education system surely has a hand in its sustainable development. Sustainable development is key, and Bleckley and Hall argue for the importance of measured, careful reforms that are able to influence systemic change and leave room for future improvement (223).

This project in the city of New Orleans is nowhere near finished. The city stands today, 10 years after the hurricane, with a school system that stumbled to get on its feet but educates its children as individuals tirelessly work to overcome challenges and defend themselves in the hopes of a better future. Schools are still low performing compared to the rest of the state (SPENO 2013, 23), and there is still certainly far more to be done. The implications of an all-charter district will not truly be uncovered for another ten or twenty years, but the constant reminder that “no one has a permanent entitlement to run a school” (*Rebirth*) present in the existing system will, in all hopefulness, encourage school officials to stay accountable to both the students and the communities they serve and rise up out of challenges with a renewed motivation and dedication. Charter schools are not the ultimate answer to any city struggling to develop economically: the ingredients are hard work, high standards, integrity, cooperation, and the willingness to learn from mistakes (*Rebirth*).

New Orleans teaches us that passionate individuals working for a common cause can inspire change on a large-scale level. Out of one of the worst disasters in the nation rose a chance for a people, hell-bent on returning to the city they love, to experiment with education reform in a radical way that is difficult to come by in 21st century America. New Orleans uncovered the

great challenges with shaping a school system almost from scratch: discrimination, lack of funding, a diverse and shifting labor market, and a great need for unity in a city united by a vibrant culture. However, over ten years, New Orleans has kept its heart beating. There is still far to go in the future of the city, but the development that has recurred in the city since the hurricane proves that even the most hopeless situations can shine with possibility, and that beyond the education system, New Orleans can find ways to regain stability and rise back to strength in America.

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