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REVIEW OF *TEN YEARS IN NEW ORLEANS: PUBLIC SCHOOL RESURGENCE AND THE PATH AHEAD*

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Summary of Review

A recent report published by two organizations, Public Impact and New Schools for New Orleans, reviews the ten years of education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans, and the creation of a “portfolio model” of school governance. While the report acknowledges some of the critiques of these reforms, it exaggerates improvements and inaccurately downplays the ways that the reforms created and, in some cases, exacerbated inequities. In addition, the report erroneously presents the reforms as the result of a logical and apolitical process that simply recasts the role of government in public education, changing from the manager or operator of schools to “a regulator of educational outcomes and equity,” with operation turned over to a variety of non-profit organizations. Finally, the report overstates its claims of post-Katrina academic gains in New Orleans, evidence for which is scant and has significant limitations, particularly due to the repeated changes in test-score standards across the decade. For these reasons, the report does little to accurately inform the lay public or scholars about the current state and future of public education in New Orleans or the viability of “portfolio” districts.

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REVIEW OF *TEN YEARS IN NEW ORLEANS: PUBLIC SCHOOL RESURGENCE AND THE PATH AHEAD*

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I. Introduction

Ten Years in New Orleans: Public School Resurgence and the Path Ahead uses what the authors claim is the remarkable improvement within the New Orleans schools to argue that the reform experiment has been an unquestioned success, one that other cities would do well to duplicate. The report is timely in light of the 10 year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina and an intensifying debate about the future of urban school systems. While the move from a traditional school district with an elected school board that has oversight and control of schools to a hybrid governance model (or “portfolio model”) of public education with a percentage of schools directly run by an elected school board and a percentage of schools run by charter management operators (both for-profit and non-profit), has been in development for nearly two decades, the scale and magnitude of the New Orleans implementation of the portfolio model over the last 10 years is significant and historic.¹

The report consists of six “chapters” in which the authors attempt to demonstrate how each key lever informs and is pertinent to the reforms in New Orleans. The authors lay out an ambitious vision in which New Orleans becomes “America’s first great urban public school system”:

one whose schools perform on par with the best suburban districts in America; one that personalizes student experience for all children; one that provides multiple rigorous pathways through and beyond high school to help every child, regardless of background, flourish as an adult; and, in a city with a dark history of racial segregation, a system of schools that represent the racial and socioeconomic diversity of New Orleans.” (p. 9)

The report also identifies racial segregation as a historical legacy that will be redressed by diversifying New Orleans’ portfolio system of schools.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report contends that schools in post-Katrina New Orleans have experienced “remarkable improvement” over the last decade that can be attributed to the reforms and to portfolio governance. The authors argue that, based on state assessments and improved School Performance Scores², more students are on grade level now than in 2004; fewer

students are in failing schools; and more students are graduating from high school on time than before Katrina.

Based on these improvements, the report concludes that an important path to fixing urban schools and school districts is to sever governance and accountability from the day-to-day operation of schools:

“Revolutionizing the role of government in public education enabled our transformation. The district moved from school operator to regulator of school quality and equity in the system. Nonprofit charter school organizations led the way on performance improvement and innovation, while simultaneously recognizing that they are not niche players—they are “the system.” They are responsible for ensuring that every child receives a great education.” (p.8)

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The primary rationale for this report is the commemoration of the 10th year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, an event that ushered in enormous change in the City of New Orleans. The report’s rationale appears to be to craft a “success” narrative about a portfolio district. As such, the report endeavors to place the story of the reforms within a local and national context.

The political rationale for this report is evidenced by the omission of research that is critical of the reforms and instead bases its claims of success on newspaper articles and reports from foundations and think-tanks. The report relies on only three research reports that have not been peer-reviewed. Most troubling is that the report relies on information and data to which researchers, community members and in many instances the press, have limited access. This makes it difficult if not impossible to verify the claims put forward in the report.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report does not explain and offers no criteria to explain how it identified and selected literature for its analysis. As noted above, the findings are based primarily on a small number of non-peer reviewed studies, policy briefs and newspaper reports. The report draws heavily on materials produced by foundations that support and fund similar education reform initiatives.

The report also bases many of its claims on test score gains reported by organizations that have exclusive access to state level data that is no longer available for public verification

except by special request to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE)³ (p. 8). In all cases, the research reports have not gone through peer-review. One study that the report identifies as affirming the success of the reforms has yet to be released with the exception of articles in education reform-friendly publications⁴. The report does not acknowledge reports by organizations that are critical of the reforms. For example, the local organization, *Research on Reforms* debunked many of the test score increases

The report has utilized virtually no data that examines the qualitative impact of the reforms on families, teachers and communities.

and graduation rate claims made by reformers and the Recovery School District (RSD)⁵. One of the important contributions of the lesser-known research is that the researchers have, when the data has been available, disaggregated achievement data between Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the RSD. The report, however, presents the test score increases and graduation rates by combining data from both OPSB and the RSD. This obfuscates

the differences in the performance of the schools that the RSD took over from that of the OPSB. This distinction is important and significant in determining the impact of the reforms especially as it relates to sub-groups in RSD schools as compared to OPSB schools.

The report has utilized virtually no data that examines the qualitative impact of the reforms on families, teachers and communities.⁶ For example, how have families and children coped with the disruption of neighborhood schools? How do families and children experience the longer school days and travel time to and from school?

The report acknowledges that there have been tense moments in “building shared ownership” among various stakeholders in New Orleans and relies primarily on reflection pieces—one by a charter school principal (p. 27) and the other by the director of a research center who has conducted research on education reform (p. 73) to make this case. Additional data on community and parent satisfaction comes from surveys conducted by the local newspaper and a local university-based institute focused on education reform.⁷

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

As noted earlier, the report is divided into six sections. The report’s methods are reviewed section by section:

1. Governance: Highlights New Orleans’ decision to refocus the role of government to a regulator of educational outcomes and equity.

The report presents this governance perspective as if there was consensus through a democratic process that “government” should serve as a regulator of “educational outcomes and equity” rather than as operators of schools. In response to the criticism that

the reforms have been “done to” not “with” community consent, the report contends that since Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco received 70% of the vote in Orleans Parish, “the people” sanctioned her decisions and actions. These actions included: amending Act 35, the law that allowed the state takeover of schools; signing executive orders that allowed for the expansion of charter schools, a revision to the process that established charter schools and revision of the cut-off scores for the School Performance Score (SPS) that deemed schools as failures and made them eligible for state takeover (p. 22). While the report touts the progress over the past ten years, the SPS formula has been revised at least three times during these ten years.

A key assumption of the report is that the only role “government” can play in public education is regulatory and that non-profit charter school organizations are the best “levers” is an assumed value. The report makes the additional (and ironic) assertion that innovation and success in New Orleans needs to be free of “political intervention,”

“If our local district cannot adapt and embrace those principles without political interference, the New Orleans community would be better off navigating the current bifurcated system that has resulted in transformational academic gains.” (p14).

The report does not acknowledge that eradicating unions, reducing the size and involvement of governmental agencies and relegating them to “regulatory” functions, are all, by definition, “political intervention.”

2. Schools: Focuses on the autonomous public schools that now serve more than 90 percent of students in New Orleans’ decentralized system as drivers of innovation and system leadership.

Similar to the governance claim, the report argues that freed from focusing on governance, non-profit charter organizations can “now make core school-level decisions that affect teaching and learning, including curriculum, personnel, and instructional time.” (p. 14) Although the evidence on innovation at the pedagogical and curricular level is scant, a recent report claims that parents have a choice among many options; however, the report notes that a majority of RSD schools have adopted a longer school day.⁸ Thus, while parents can apply to a number of charter schools, the innovations that these schools offer are hardly unique. Virtually no school, with the exception of alternative schools for students needing credits to graduate and/or others who have been expelled, offer half-day options or other innovations on the length and structure of the school day. To make their claims about charter school innovations, the authors cite a parents’ guide to finding schools in New Orleans rather than independent empirical evidence on specific pedagogical and curricular innovations (p. 27).

3. Talent: Describes the unique environment in which New Orleans educators practice their craft.

The report claims that teachers are “empowered” to choose a school in which to work and are freed from the “constraints of system-wide collective bargaining agreements.” (p. 34). It is claimed that this freedom for teachers ideally to choose will facilitate an optimal learning environment for students to ensure outcomes.

“Because nearly all New Orleans educators are at-will employees, schools have autonomy to act decisively. When teachers do not generate strong academic results despite coaching and support —or are not a good fit with the school’s culture — the school can let them go.”

The report claims that in this environment of choice, schools have a responsibility to create working environments that will attract and retain the most talented and effective educators. The report cites no research or data that measures teacher satisfaction with the reforms despite the fact that there is qualitative research that documents their experiences⁹.

Although the report acknowledges that the OPSB fired the entire teaching force in 2006 due to financial insolvency, it does not acknowledge that the now deceased State Superintendent of Education, Cecil Picard, actually requested \$800,000,000 from the federal government to cover teacher salaries and health benefits¹⁰. The report also points out that in large part due to the firings, the Black teacher population has been considerably reduced (p. 34). Prior to the reforms, Black teachers were over 70% of the teaching population nearly reaching parity with the demographics of the schools.¹¹ In 2009-2010 that number had decreased to 56% and by 2014, to 49%¹². The report makes no connection between its “empowered educator” argument and the demographic mismatch created by the reforms. In 2013, African American students comprised 96% of the student population compared to being 71% of the population in OPSB schools and 44% of schools run by BESE.¹³

4. Equity: Clarifies the mechanisms adopted by public schools to ensure that reform created a system that served all New Orleans students well, particularly the most vulnerable.

According to the report:

“New Orleans’ progress on equity complements the city’s headline gains in student achievement: 80 percent of families received one of their top three school choices through EnrollNOLA, and all participating schools “backfill” empty spots in upper grades. The city’s graduation rate for students with disabilities is 60 percent—far exceeding the statewide average of 43 percent. The suspension rate is lower than the pre-2005 figure, and the expulsion rate has been below the statewide average for three consecutive academic years.” (p.46)

Most of these assignment improvements have come in the last two years after several years of protests by community members, families.¹⁴ There are still 8 schools, primarily the selective admission schools, which do not participate in the EnrollNOLA and the OneApp process (p. 46). Moreover, OneApp and the school assignment policy have been criticized for not ensuring that all parents actually received their “choice” of schools.¹⁵

Ignored in the report is the fact that OPSB schools were on a steady path of growth and progress with state accountability rating increases ranging from 3.7 % in 2002-2003 school year to 5% in school years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. Thus, at the point of the school takeovers, OPSB schools were actually improving in their District Performance Scores (DPS).¹⁶ In fact, OPSB was ranked 11th in the state for growth in years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. Moreover, while the report restates that public schools in pre-Katrina New Orleans were ranked among the lowest in the state, a figure that is technically accurate, important contextual information about not only New Orleans, but also the districts that LDOE ranked higher than OPSB is omitted.¹⁷ Thus, given the scale of both race and poverty compared to other districts, especially those that were ranked higher than OPSB, the context of education in OPSB pre-Katrina was qualitatively and significantly different than other parishes. Similarly, the district has nearly 30,000 fewer students in 2015 than it did in 2004.

It is difficult to verify or analyze the gains discussed in the report because LDOE has restricted access to state level data.¹⁸ In addition, while the report makes distinctions between Black and White test scores and graduation rates, the studies do not disaggregate the data between OPSB and RSD schools.

5. Community: Reflects on challenges and successes in building shared ownership among a diverse group of New Orleanians for the transformation of public schools.

“Yet after a decade of unprecedented growth and irrefutable evidence that schools are getting better, many in our community remain frustrated with how reform in New Orleans happened, how decisions are made, and who makes those decisions. There is a pervasive feeling, especially within many black communities, that reform has happened “to” and not “with” the students and families served by New Orleans schools. This leads some to ask the question, “Was it worth it?” Our answer is definitive: Yes. Student outcomes must be the lens through which we judge reforms. Our students are, without question, better off than a decade ago. But the frustration many feel is real and must be heard and acknowledged. If New Orleans does not reconcile our city’s perennial issues — particularly those steeped in race and class — we will remain mired in the same arguments for another decade. These disputes will continue to drain energy from our shared focus: ensuring that every child in New Orleans is set up for a great life.” (p. 58)

While acknowledging that many African Americans in New Orleans feel disenfranchised by the decision-making process and the implementation of the reforms, the report justifies these actions by using questionable test scores and graduation rates. A local research group who sued for access to LDOE data, have identified a consistent gap in graduation rates between RSD schools and OPSB schools between 2006-2009 and an unusual use of the code, “transferred out of state or country” to justify discrepancies in cohort graduation rates¹⁹. Some qualitative research has documented the community protests and teacher dissatisfaction. The report ignores this research²⁰ and only cites newspaper articles.

6. Funders: Outlines how one-time federal funds and philanthropic support have contributed to the past decade of reform. (p. 9)

The report identifies reform funding sources that have primarily come from out of state (p. 69). According to the report, New Orleans schools received \$5 billion in local, state, federal and philanthropic funding over the last 10 years (p. 70). The report doesn't address whether such external funding levels are sustainable. For example, in order to continue the constant closing and re-opening of schools, both charter and traditional, will require a steady level of funding from the federal government and/or philanthropic entities. To date, it is unclear what, if any, research exists on the economics of the reforms and their sustainability on a long-term basis.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report does not present original or empirical research but bases its claims on advocacy publications that have not been peer-reviewed, and newspaper articles that primarily accept the claims made by vested interest reformers. Moreover, under the guise of protecting student information, access to state-wide data is significantly limited given the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) reorganization of the website and unwillingness to release data that was previously accessible to researchers.²¹

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report tells us very little that has not already been reported by advocacy groups. It presents the reforms as successful and beneficial for children, families and the larger New Orleans community in spite of strained relationships and distrust. It does not include a full accounting of the historical context of public education in New Orleans nor does it provide a description of New Orleans public schools prior to Katrina. Thus, it obscures the context while citing poverty as the reason that the “success” of the reforms is not as great as the reformers had hoped.

This report does not meaningfully examine research that has been critical of the reforms. Moreover it perpetuates a narrative that the schools pre-Katrina were a failure while advancing its arguments on the basis of unverifiable reports of success. The limited access to data by outside researchers, lack of rigorous research on the funding apparatus, questionable sustainability of a bifurcated public education system, inequities in the school enrollment process and the demographic imbalance in the teaching force, undermine the report's sweeping conclusions. The research that the report excludes tells a different and far more troubling story about the reforms in New Orleans.

Notes and References

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- 2 SPS are numerical scores given to schools by the LDOE based on indices for attendance, assessments, graduation and dropouts. The criteria vary on school configuration, i.e., SPS for K-8 schools do not include a graduation index.
- 3 See <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/data-center/protecting-student-privacy> for a justification of restricting access to state level achievement level to only approved organizations.
- 4 See <http://educationnext.org/good-news-new-orleans-evidence-reform-student-achievement/>.
- 5 Ferguson, B. (October 2013). Court rules that Louisiana Department of Education has discretion to select its evaluators. September 15, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.researchonreforms.org/html/documents/CourtRulesLDOECanSelectEvaluators.pdf>. District court reversed on decision to refuse data to Research on Reforms. See <http://www.researchonreforms.org/html/documents/AppealCourtReversesDistrictCourt.pdf>. For a list of reports published by Research on Reforms, see <http://www.researchonreforms.org/html/documentreposit.html>
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- 10 Zimmerman, (May 23, 2011). Trial on New Orleans school employee terminations after Hurricane Katrina starts. *Times-Picayune*. Retrieved on September 15, 2015 from http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2011/05/trial_on_firings_at_new_orlean.html.

It is not clear how the state used these funds since few of the 7500 teachers who were fired were recalled and rehired. Picard argued in his letter that the state needed the funds to provide for teachers', "livelihood, health insurance coverage, and just being able to cover basic needs."
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- 12 LDOE Teacher Demographic Data, on file with author; Barrett, N. & Harris, D. (2015). Significant changes in New Orleans teacher workforce. Retrieved on September 30, 2015 from <http://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/ERA-Policy-Brief-Changes-in-the-New-Orleans-Teacher-Workforce.pdf>.
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- 16 To access district performance data in the aggregate for years 2001-2014, see <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/data/dps/>.
- 17 Prior to the takeover, New Orleans had been the largest district in the state with over 68,000 students. While OPSB ranked 66 out of 68 schools, its total Black student population of 60,718 (93.5%) was nearly 50 times that of the district rated the highest for its Black student Group Performance Score (GPS). In 2004-2005, Zachary Community School District, only had a total of 1,230 (38.1%) Black students in its district. Interestingly, New Orleans, in 2004-2005 had a White student enrollment of 2,183 (3.4%) and was the top ranked school district in the state for its White student GPS. Zachary Community School District with 1,961 White students (60%), was ranked 3rd for its White student GPS.

In terms of students on free/reduced lunch, OPSB was ranked 66th for its GPS with this population. However, its population of students who qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch was nearly double that of any other district in the state at over 50,000 (77%) students, and nearly 10 times higher than that of the district that was ranked as highest in the state for GPS with this population, Vernon Parish. Vernon Parish had only 4,780 (48%) students who qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch in 2004-2005.
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