

# **The Post-Katrina New Orleans School Reforms: Implications for National School Reform and the Role of Government**

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## **Opening Remarks: Hurricane and More**

August 29, 2005. Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans. At first, it looked like the city would be OK. Soon afterwards, the levies failed. More than 1,000 people died. Eighty percent of the city was flooded, in some areas with up to 20 feet of water filled with chemicals. There was more than \$100 billion in property damage. The city was essentially shut down for months. This was a real tragedy that half the world watched on live television.

There are a lot of different dimensions of this we could talk about. I'm going to talk about the schools. All the students and teachers left. Most of the buildings were heavily damaged. The city was left with no local source of revenue. The district was effectively bankrupt. So, what to do? In theory they could have kept things the way they were and the state could have stepped in with some stop-gap funding until the city got back on its feet. But there were both political and practical reasons why this was unlikely.

On a practical level, there was no way to open schools in all parts of the city, so there was going to have to be expansive choice options. Also, the state was not in a strong financial position, so taking advantage of even modest federal funding for charter schools was attractive.

Politically, most elected officials viewed the hurricane as an opportunity for a radical overhaul of a system they had long seen as plagued by

academic failure and corruption. Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's former chief of staff, once commented during the 2008 financial crisis that "you never want a serious crisis to go to waste."

Some local leaders, backed up by funding from certain national foundations, took that advice to heart. Within six months of the hurricane:

(1) Almost all public schools were moved from the Orleans Parish School Board to a state agency, the Recovery School District (RSD)

(2) Almost all schools became charter schools, managed by Charter Management Organizations.

(3) Students could choose to attend any public school, so long as there was space available.

(4) All teachers in the district were fired and the vast majority replaced by young and inexperienced teachers from outside the state, none of whom work under a union contract.

Some like to call this a "portfolio model" although I think this does a poor job of describing what's actually happening. But whatever we call it, it was a major shift.

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### 3 Main Arguments

I'm going to make **three main arguments about the New Orleans reforms**:

(1) The New Orleans school reforms are **historically unprecedented** in their rejection of the typical system of public education; it is the most radical overhaul of any type in any school district in at least a century.

(2) Despite the distinctive features of New Orleans, and perhaps because of these features, the effects of the New Orleans reforms

are very **relevant and significant** to Detroit and the rest of the country's major cities.

(3) **We know much less than we think** about the effects of the New Orleans school reforms.

My over-arching argument is that we desperately need more evidence on New Orleans. This evidence is really going to matter.

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## **History and The One Best System**

To understand the New Orleans school reforms, we have to start by describing the system it replaced. Before Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans' public school system had many of the same basic structural characteristics as just about every other city:

(1) Schools were governed by a school district, governed by a locally elected school board that was responsible for setting district policy and selecting a superintendent.

(2) The superintendent actively managed the day-to-day operations of schools, including hiring and firing principals as school leaders.

(3) Teachers were certified, trained in schools of education (SOEs), and work under union contracts.

(4) Students attended schools based mainly on where they live (attendance zones).

The historian David Tyack has deemed this the "One Best System" and most of it dates back more than a century (the main exception being teacher unions, which came in the 1960s).

This One Best System has been under attack for about 50 years. There are four main lines of attack:

(1) Local democratic governance, combined with teacher unions, create **bureaucracy** that leads to inefficiency, a one-size-fits all approach, and stifled innovation.

(2) Superintendents, especially in big cities, **cannot effectively manage so many schools.**

(3) The absence of parental choice **prevents competition** among schools and **creates mismatches** between student needs and school missions.

(4) The **bottom line results** from this One Best System have been stagnant—test scores and high school graduation rates have increased (but very slowly) for decades; we have fallen behind other nations.

Some of these criticisms reflect philosophical disagreements: Those who view the goal of education as the preparation of engaged citizens naturally prefer democratic governance. They believe the “Common School” is intended to provide a core of values and ideas that weave society together into a single **fabric, or at least a quilt.** By this reasoning, the “mismatch” of individual student needs and school practices is a problem that schools need to fix by creating common values and a problem that was, in any event, subservient to the needs of the community. We need citizens who have common democratic values, knowledge, and beliefs.

Not surprisingly, those who view the development of citizens as the main goal also care less about test scores, innovation, or meeting student and parent demands. None of these things aligns with their worldview about what education should be about. Other elements of the debate are about facts and data, a topic I will return to later.

Despite decades of relentless criticism, the One Best System has persisted. On the face of it, it seems that it survived the desegregation and Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the economic and social upheaval of the 1970s, the political conservatism of the 1980s, and apparently the information technology revolution that took hold a decade ago.

But under the surface, the One Best System was clearly weakened. The Reagan Administration report, *A Nation at Risk*, led to the standards movements, which led to more standardized testing, which eventually gave way to *No Child Left Behind*. In effect, **test-based accountability** took control away from school boards and placed it in the hands of state and federal governments.

In the early 1990s, driven partly by shifts in school funding from local to state level (such as Proposal A in Michigan), a new form of accountability emerged, based on **the logic of free markets**. We will focus today on charter schools, but the idea is also associated with open enrollment, magnet schools, private school vouchers and tuition tax credits, all of which have become more common options in recent years. These reforms also shifted control away from school districts, this time placing it in the hands of parents. While not directly aimed at school districts, these reforms had the effect of shifting control away from them.

While the ideas of test- and market-based accountability had gained a foot in the door, **they had limited effects on how the One Best System worked**. The vast majority of students were still in public schools overseen by school boards, managed by superintendents and their hand-picked principals, and taught in classrooms by teachers who graduated from university-based schools of education and had the job security of tenure and the representation of unions. NCLB diminished teacher autonomy somewhat, but still very few teachers or principals lost their jobs for performance reasons, at least not performance as defined by student learning. And schools were closed down only when enrollments declined and mostly as a result of natural demographic shifts or other fiscal pressures, not because of low test scores. Perhaps most frustrating to reform advocates was the fact that parents actually seemed like it! They were generally satisfied with the limited choices offered by school districts and their traditional public schools and did not take advantage of choices even when made available.

Nevertheless, **these test- and market-based reforms did crack open the door of the One Best System. And Hurricane Katrina blew the**

**door wide open.** The New Orleans reforms overturn every core tenet of the One Best System:

**Table 1: Contrasting the One Best System and New Orleans**

	<i>Traditional Public School</i>	<i>New Orleans</i>
Governance	Locally elected board	Oversight by statewide elected board (BESE)
Management	Superintendent, active management	RSD supt, oversees the contract
Teachers	SOE-trained Certified, experienced, unionized	TFA and alt cert, Uncertified, inexperienced Non-union
Parental Choice	Based on home address	Almost completely open
School closings	Schools closed based on complex political pressures and enrollment levels	Schools are closed based mainly on scores

The changes were clearly dramatic and fundamental. Some might argue that I’m exaggerating, however, and perhaps downplaying the importance of prior efforts to reform urban schools and take control away from school districts. But I’ve talked with some historian friends and none have disagreed. Mayoral control has been tried, although even that still relies on local politics, superintendents as active managers, teacher unions, and so on. A full-scale voucher program would arguably be more radical, but no city has ever done that. The closest comparisons are really other portfolio districts that have largely followed in New Orleans footsteps (Washington, DC, NYC, and so on), but none compares

to New Orleans in the market share associated with the alternative model.

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## Arguments Against Significance

Given all of this, it might seem surprising that the significance of the reforms is in question: (a) nothing like this has ever been done; and (b) the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina has lent a significance to everything that happens in New Orleans.

So, why is the significance of the reforms a bone of contention?

**Because it is not “generalizable” or “representative” of what of what is happening in other cities.** There are four main arguments having to do with the specific design of the reforms and the context:

- (1) The fact that the hurricane drove the reform makes it **impossible to replicate.**
- (2) The specifics of the reforms **differ from other cities** like Detroit that are pursuing the general idea.
- (3) Even before the storm, **New Orleans was an unusual city**, so the effects of any type of policy might not apply to other cities.
- (4) The fact that **the hurricane drove the reform** makes it difficult to learn whether the reforms really worked. In short, there is nothing to learn here that would apply anywhere else.

As you can tell, while I understand where these arguments are coming from, I believe that they are wrong-headed. **The first two arguments are valid but short-sighted.** The distinctive features of New Orleans should not lead us to downplay the significance of a once-in-a-century reform by focusing on what is politically possible right now. To understand the significance of New Orleans, you have to take the long view. What about the idea that the reform model in New Orleans is different?

**Aside on Detroit and EAA:** The New Orleans model is clearly very different from Detroit and its Education Achievement Authority. The EAA is more like a Charter Management Organization than a portfolio manager. It operates with one school model, based on blended learning, rather than a diverse array; and it actively manages the schools itself, completely the opposite of a portfolio approach. In fact, the rest of the Detroit public school system is more like a portfolio model than the EAA.

The versions in Washington, DC, New York City, and Los Angeles—and Detroit—will change. And more cities are in the early formative stages. New Orleans is significant because it could affect the direction of reform across the country, over the long haul.

**But New Orleans is still a unique city, it is argued.** That’s true to an extent. It snows in New Orleans once every 20 years. We have beignets instead of donuts, Bourbon Street instead of Greektown, jazz instead of blues and hip-hop, street cars instead of the People Mover, Mardi Gras instead of the Woodward Dream Cruise. I say this partly facetiously, but I do think these impressions of New Orleans are based partly on impressions people get about New Orleans from attending conferences and wandering around the French Quarter. When people tell me “New Orleans is so different,” I ask how? **How is New Orleans different in ways that affect how school reforms play out?**

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### **New Orleans as the Best-Case Scenario**

There are in fact some major differences that affect generalizability to other cities.

(1) In New Orleans, **there was nowhere to go but up.** If things are so bad, then any reform should make things better.

(2) Thousands of smart, ambitious people came to New Orleans to help create and rebuild schools, and to teach in the schools. Because of the Hurricane and the reforms, it was suddenly **cool to come to New Orleans.** The city is now the “nation’s capital of school reform,” seemingly drawing in half the public school talent

from Washington, DC and New York City; and roughly one-third of public school teachers in New Orleans are TFA.

(3) In addition to the reforms, there was a large **infusion of funding** from national foundations and the federal government, so that per-pupil funding was actually far above pre-storm levels; some of these funds were for reconstruction of buildings and creating new school organizations.

In addition, as I've said, the reforms were implemented **at full scale (high dosage)**. Every major element of the system was changed.

For all of these reasons, I am arguing that New Orleans was **the best-case scenario** for this type of reform. The reforms included every bell and whistle in a place that was apparently in desperate need of improvement. This is similar to the econometric notion of an upper bound estimate. It would be somewhat shocking if this did not work in New Orleans. If it doesn't work in New Orleans, it is either a really bad idea generally or thing were much better in New Orleans than we thought. Either way, the reformers would have a problem.

**The broader distinction I'm making is between generalizability and relevance.** If a policy works in a place where it is unlikely to work or doesn't work in a place where it should, this provides evidence that is relevant for everyone, regardless of the usual standards of generalizability. It might seem paradoxical, but I'm going to argue that it doesn't matter whether the New Orleans results generalize, but **it's precisely because they don't generalize that makes them relevant nationally.**

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## Two More Arguments on Relevance

In some sense, my argument above is simply that the notion of generalizability misses the point.

First, the debate over generalizability is an academic debate. Policymakers do not care whether academics think estimated effects generalize and, second, even if they did, the real significance of New

Orleans is that it is a proof of concept, a beacon and a symbol for school reform—in ways similar to the Perry Preschool Project, the Tennessee STAR class size experiment, and so on. The One Best System started in the late 1800s in Boston, hardly a city that was representative of the nation, yet almost every city in the country followed suit.

The political power of the New Orleans reforms is unquestionable. In the case of New Orleans, President Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal have all lauded the reforms. It is also why 27 other school districts and states are following New Orleans' lead. The big national foundations are pouring money in, the same foundations that are pouring money into Detroit.

So, there are three reasons why New Orleans is relevant and will be influential to the future of school reform, despite the fact that the results will not generalize in the scientific sense:

- (1) This is a best-case scenario.
- (2) Policymakers do not care about generalizability.
- (3) The power of New Orleans is that as a symbol and proof of concept.

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## Pause and Recap

So far, I've covered the first two arguments.

(1) The New Orleans school reforms are **historically unprecedented** in their rejection of the typical system of public education; it is the most radical overhaul of any type in any school district in at least a century.

(2) Despite the distinctive features of New Orleans, and perhaps because of these features, the effects of the New Orleans reforms are **relevant and will be influential** in Detroit and the rest of the country's major cities

Now, I'm going to turn to the third:

(3) We know much less than we think about New Orleans.

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## **We Know Very Little**

I'm going to break up my discussion of the evidence into two parts, what we know about how bad the schools were before the reforms, and what we know about how much they improved.

Before I start, I want you to ask yourself the following the question: What is your impression of the quality of public schools in the city of Detroit? Then ask yourself, where does that impression come from? What evidence do you really have? Have you ever been in a Detroit Public School? Was there a great research study?

You are not alone. People in New Orleans have the same impression. A friend who works in a national teacher union told me he thought something like the New Orleans reforms were sorely needed there. This is remarkable, considering this may be one of the greatest threats to teacher unions the country has seen in a long time—remember, all the teachers were fired and the teacher union contract was ended.

In New Orleans, I hear three types of answers:

(1) ***Anecdotes and horror stories.*** The most common anecdote is about a girl who graduated from a New Orleans public school before Katrina as the valedictorian, but who could not pass the state test, even after repeated attempts. The test is not considered difficult by any means. Most students in the states pass, but this valedictorian did not. The obvious response here is that this is just one story. It does not speak to the general performance of schools.

(2) ***System-Level Corruption.*** The level of corruption and dysfunction on the school board was high and this was a regular story in the newspaper. The FBI literally had a branch office within the Orleans Parish School Board offices before Katrina to root out corruption. A school board president went to prison. School board members were constantly bickering in public. But we should not under-estimate the ability, or the will, of teachers

to overcome the problems created by those who oversee them. At the very least, we should be careful to judge the quality of schools by the quality of their governing bodies. If we were to judge the quality of our roads or national defense based on how well Congress functions right now, we'd have to be pretty worried right now.

(3) ***Low test score levels.*** New Orleans, Detroit and other cities are constantly under the gun because they rank at or near the bottom of the state on test scores level such as % proficient. But as we have learned from recent educational research, test score levels are very poor metrics of school performance. The vast majority of the entire black-white achievement gap in 8<sup>th</sup> grade can be attributed to the black-white gap in kindergarten and therefore cannot be attributed to schools. People seriously underestimate the challenges educators face in these schools. **In my prior research including almost every school in the country, I found that a low-poverty, low-minority school is 89 times more likely to be high-performing than a high-poverty, high-minority school.** We should not excuse low-performance, but it is equally true that we cannot expect public schools to solve the egregious problems some children come to school with.

These three types of evidence are relevant, but we rely far too heavily on them. Again, the reformers might be right. Maybe New Orleans schools really were terrible. If they're right, then the reforms should have a big effect.

My point is that one of the main problems with urban education is how we think about "performance." We think of "low-performing" schools as those with low test scores, and we wouldn't send our kids to one of these schools. But this fails to distinguish the effectiveness of the school personnel from the problems facing their students. **The theory of action of the New Orleans school reform is that school personnel were failing.** Yet, none of the above evidence takes into account student background. There is no evidence, for example, that the value-added of New Orleans public schools was below average before the storm, or even descriptive evidence about the quality of classroom instruction.

So, we know very little about the pre-Katrina period. We actually know quite a fair amount about the post-Katrina period:

(1) New Orleans charter schools probably generate more achievement than public schools with comparable students (CREDO).

(2) RSD charter schools seem to generate more achievement growth than other parts of the New Orleans public school system.

So, that means the reforms worked, right? We have horror stories, corruption, and low test scores before the storm and evidence that charter schools are better traditional public schools.

Unfortunately, this doesn't really answer the question of interest: **Are students in New Orleans public schools learning more than they would have had the One Best System been left in place?** This is going to be a tough question to answer without looking at what was happening before and after the storm. We have a natural experiment and we need to study it like one.

Analysis of natural experiments is never a simple task because we need a comparison group with a common trend. We need to compare the treatment group with some other group, before and after. Yet, at this point, the only before and after comparison we have are two trend lines: the % of New Orleans students who are proficient before and after, and the same trend for the state. This comparison seems favorable. New Orleans scores have increased markedly since the reforms were put in place and at a rate faster than the state as a whole.

But this may not tell us very much:

(1) **The New Orleans population changed.** How can we know how much students would have learned without the reforms if those students dispersed all over the country and many didn't return (for non-random reasons)?

(2) **The trauma of the storm affected student achievement.** Even if the population was the same, returning students

experienced a horrible tragedy; they were separated from family, had friends and family members die, lost possessions and often returned to low-quality housing.

**(3) Inherent challenges evaluating reforms with high-stakes testing** when the test scores are the primary outcome measures.

I have identified several strategies for dealing with these problems that, collectively, I think will be persuasive. No single identification strategy is likely to work but if several imperfect ones point in the same direction then this gives us greater confidence.

### **Education Research Alliance for New Orleans**

A year and a half ago, I moved to Tulane to create a new organization to carry out this work. I'm pleased to announce that I've launched the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. Our objective is to produce rigorous, objective, and useful research to understand the effects of the reforms and to help the system improve over time.

Over the next year, I expect to build up to a staff of 3-4 PhD researchers plus, 2-3 research associates, a small army of undergraduate and graduate students, and a national network of researchers with interest in these topics.

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### **Conclusions**

Why am I doing this? For all the reasons I've just talked about. What's happening in New Orleans is **historically unprecedented** in its rejection of the One Best System, the results will be **relevant** to cities across the country and to the future of urban education reform. And Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst disasters in the nation's history.