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Dismantling A Community Timeline

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Spring 2005

The New Orleans Public Schools is a struggling district of 63,000 students. The district's student population has been decreasing over the past decade. Most of the city's white families have retreated to neighboring parishes or put their children in private schools. Middle-class and professional African-American families rely heavily on the city's many Catholic schools.

Drained of this middle-class constituency and the political support that it provided, the New Orleans Public Schools are spiraling downward. Year after year, attempts to increase local funding for the schools fail to gain support in citywide elections. Year after year, the bountiful profits of the New Orleans tourist industry and the oil and gas resources that have lined corporate pockets and federal coffers so handsomely, fail to find their way into the city's education system.

Mismanagement and infighting on the Orleans Parish School Board feed the perception that the system is broken beyond repair.

But "beyond repair" is *not* the perception of many of the district's teachers, who commit year after year to working in some of the city's most troubled schools, like Frederick Douglass High School in the 9th Ward.

Teachers at Douglass have created Students at the Center, an elective writing course that serves as a sanctuary for small groups of students at Douglass (and other schools) each year. In Students at the Center, young people are encouraged to find their voices, develop their writing skills, and engage in their communities. Along with teacher Jim Randels, several of the students have joined the Douglass Community Coalition to involve residents of the 9th Ward in supporting Douglass, and to engage students at Douglass in community organizing efforts.

These socially active teachers, and thousands of other employees of the New Orleans Public Schools, are members of AFT Local 527, the

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United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO). The union has a long history of progressive activism and political action.

As the summer of 2005 winds down, students, teachers, and parents prepare for another school year.

August 18

New Orleans schools open for the 2005-06 school year.

August 23

Tropical Storm Katrina forms in the Caribbean and quickly gains hurricane strength. On Aug. 25 the storm makes its first U.S. landfall in Florida, before heading into the Gulf of Mexico

August 26

Hurricane Katrina reaches category 5 status as one of the fiercest hurricanes ever to approach the United States. The massive storm inches north across the Gulf. Evacuation orders are issued for New Orleans and surrounding coastal areas.

August 29

Hurricane Katrina slams into New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Levees fail to hold back the storm surge rising in Lake Ponchartrain and the Industrial Canal that bisects the city's 9th Ward as it connects the lake to the Mississippi River. Vast sections of the city, particularly the low-lying and predominantly African-American 9th Ward, are flooded with as much as 30 feet of water.

The city's "Lower 9th," to the east of the canal and already isolated from the rest of the city, is particularly hard hit. Hundreds of mostly low-income African Americans who could not afford to evacuate ahead of the storm drown in the floodwaters.

Some of the city's more white and wealthy neighborhoods, like the famous Garden District and the French Quarter, rest on higher ground. They are largely spared from the flooding.

In Washington and Baton Rouge, while the federal government bungles its response to Katrina, conservative education groups and the education industry lobby (the Education Industry Association represents corporations that market goods to school systems — textbooks, assess-

ments, tutoring services — and also includes major corporate operators of public schools) are ready with a unified message: This is an opportunity to create a new paradigm of publicly funded, market-based schools that provide flexibility for individual families. They begin lobbying heavily in Baton Rouge and hold private meetings in Washington with U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

This influential interest group is also quick to dominate the media. Their message is simple: Those who call for rebuilding a centralized public school infrastructure are defenders of the status quo. Either you think the schools were working for everyone, or you agree that the whole system, and the people who worked in it, must be scrapped. It is an insidious — and pervasive — message.

September 14

Quickly joining the dismantling bandwagon is Margaret Spellings. In a letter to state school chiefs, Spellings calls charter schools "uniquely equipped" to serve students displaced by Katrina, and announces that she will waive some federal restrictions on charter schools in order to help new schools in New Orleans get up and running.

September 15

The Orleans Parish School Board, convening (in Baton Rouge) for the first time since the storm, votes to place the district's 7,500 school employees, including 4,500 teachers along with cafeteria workers, custodians, and school nurses on "disaster leave" without pay.

Also at this meeting, the board quickly approves an application to establish the Lusher Charter School. Lusher is an existing K-5 public school that largely serves students of professors at nearby Tulane University. Charter status allows Lusher parents to establish admissions criteria for their school, disengage the teaching staff from the union contract, and direct the school's curriculum and finances independent of the city school system.

September 30

Secretary Spellings announces a U.S. Department of Education grant of \$20.9 million to Louisiana for the establishment and opening of charter schools.

As New Orleans begins to collect itself, Mayor Ray Nagin creates the Bring New Orleans Back Commission to guide redevelopment and rebuilding. The commission's education committee is heavily populated by charter proponents and national education activists. There are no seats on the committee designated for representatives of parents or teachers from the New Orleans Public Schools.

Over the next three months the committee holds a series of public hearings, including hearings in cities like Atlanta and Houston where thousands of evacuees have landed. The commission also consults with other school districts around the country and looks at what's working and what isn't in public education. But while this deliberative process is underway, other interests are moving swiftly ahead. The Bring New Orleans Back education committee's final report is not released until January 2006.

October 2005

The near total evacuation of New Orleans, and the storm damage that makes much of the city uninhabitable, decimates the already inadequate primary source of funding for the New Orleans public schools — the local property tax.

Local property, however, is not emerging from the floodwaters at the same pace. Low-income African Americans from the 9th Ward see little hope of being able to return to their homes for months — if ever. But middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods are largely intact, and so the early faces returning to New Orleans are largely white and middle-class. A debate opens up around how, or even *whether*, to rebuild all of New Orleans. Some are quite blunt in their promotion of a plan that would restore *only* the middle-class or predominantly white neighborhoods.

Proposals of all sorts emerge. But none gathers enough support to move forward. In the void created by this inertia, the free-market "reformers" continue to move rapidly and decisively, at least when it comes to the schools.

October 7

The Orleans Parish School Board votes 4–2 to convert all 13 schools in the Algiers community on the west bank of the Mississippi River to charter schools. These are to be open admission

schools (with no academic criteria or neighborhood boundaries guiding enrollment). But because they are charter schools, they are permitted to establish a limit on the size of their student body. Unlike regular public schools, they are not required to admit anyone once they reach their stated capacity. The application specifically states that employees of the Algiers Charter School District cannot be members of the teachers union or considered employees of the New Orleans Public Schools.

Simultaneously, Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco issues an executive order waiving key portions of the state's charter school law to make conversion and creation of charters easier. One of the provisions that is waived is a requirement that the conversion of a traditional public school to a charter be conditioned on the approval of a school's faculty and parents.

Following the board vote, an African-American pastor in Algiers files a lawsuit against the new charter district demanding a public and transparent debate over whether the proposal is necessary and in the best interests of the community.

October 14

A civil court judge in New Orleans orders the school board to stop its plans for a charter district in Algiers, agreeing that the board acted without providing the opportunity for public comment, as required.

October 28

The Orleans Parish School Board meets again and takes several steps:

- Having complied with the requirements for public comment, they re-vote to create the Algiers Charter School District, converting all 13 schools on the West Bank to charter schools. Eight are slated to open in November, with five additional schools opening at a later date.
- The new district has no board of directors, so the Orleans Parish School Board names itself as the founding board.
- The board also grants charters to seven east-bank schools. One of those is for the establishment of Lusher Middle and High School. The board agrees to turn over the Alcee Fortier High School building for Lusher's

expansion into a K-12 charter with two campuses. Fortier was a virtually all-black, low-performing high school with just over 900 students before the storm. Most of these families are still outside the city and are not aware that their school is being closed and the building handed over to Lusher. The new Lusher charter school will be a selective-admissions school, with first preference given to the children of professional staff at Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, and Xavier Universities. (When registration at Lusher begins, the school reaches capacity so quickly that even some former Lusher Elementary students are denied access to the middle school). In the months after the takeover of Fortier, Tulane University helps raise more than \$15 million in private and public funds to renovate the Fortier building.

In the face of concern that the growing number of charter schools in the city might attempt to “cream” their student bodies, the school board passes a resolution requiring each charter approved by the board to accept a minimum of 10 percent students with disabilities and a minimum of 20 percent low-income students (prior to Katrina, 20 percent of New Orleans public school students were in special education, and 75 percent were eligible for free and reduced meals). Yet, conceding that it would be unrealistic to expect compliance with these requirements given the uncertain and still-chaotic situation in the city, the resolution allows schools to waive them until New Orleans is “fully repopulated.”

November 28

The first public school in the city — Benjamin Franklin Elementary Math and Science School — reopens its doors to students. Ben Franklin was a selective admissions school before Katrina, but opens now without restriction for any elementary students who are back in the city.

November 30

The state legislature votes to take over the 107 New Orleans Public Schools that performed at or below the state average in 2004-05. The legislation, known as Act 35, creates the Recovery School District (RSD) as the operating entity for

these schools. The legislature leaves only four schools under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board. Ironically, these are the formerly high-performing selective-admission schools in the city. All but three of 15 Orleans Parish legislators vote against the takeover.

As the new year approaches, an increasing number of African Americans are beginning to migrate back to New Orleans. While returning to the 9th Ward is impossible (armed military personnel continue to bar access to the neighborhood and no demolition or rebuilding is allowed), returning families are finding temporary or permanent shelter elsewhere in the city.

December 9

The Orleans Parish School Board votes to fire all teachers and other employees of the New Orleans Public Schools, effective Jan. 31, 2006. A lawsuit filed by several employees succeeds in winning a temporary restraining order, putting the official firings on hold for two months.

Many returning teachers express anger at the rapidly proliferating charter schools, which are requiring teachers to take written tests as part of the application process and to work on year-to-year contracts. Many teachers opt to take early retirement, which gives them access to union health insurance and pension plans they otherwise fear losing. Hundreds find teaching positions outside of New Orleans.

December 14

Five Algiers schools open their doors as charter schools.

January 17, 2006

The mayor’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission releases its education committee report. Among other things, the committee recommends establishing a “single aligned governing body” to provide a unified vision and stronger accountability for public schools in New Orleans. Even the pro-charter chairman of the committee expresses concern that without some central oversight it will be difficult to guarantee or even adequately monitor, the schools’ academic and administrative quality.

State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard rejects the idea of any centralized oversight.

January 28

A lawsuit is filed in New Orleans by civil rights attorney Tracie Washington. The suit presents the names of 13 students, including one with autism, who have been denied seats in some of the city's schools.

The same day, Orleans Parish officials present state officials with a list of 170 students who have been turned away from New Orleans schools. There is emerging concern that the city's charter schools are filled to capacity and not enough guaranteed-access schools are available for the increasing number of returning students. The state's Recovery School District — which will offer universal access — is not scheduled to operate at scale until the 2006–07 school year.

What's needed are more open admission, universal access schools. But there's no money for the Orleans Parish School Board to repair and staff additional buildings. The money is in charters, they are told. Groups wanting to open charter schools can receive as much as \$2,000 per student to get up and running. Federal and foundation funding is beginning to flow into New Orleans, but the public system is not seeing that cash.

By the end of January there are 17 schools open in New Orleans:

- Three are Orleans Parish public schools.
- Three are charters authorized by the Recovery School District.
- Five are charters operated by the Algiers Charter School District.
- Six are charters operated by other entities.

All of the Algiers charter elementary schools are reported to be at full capacity and are turning children away.

February 16

The Orleans Parish School Board again votes 4–1 to fire 7,500 teachers and other school employees. Attorneys representing some of these workers note that if they remain furloughed, rather than fired, they are entitled by law to first consideration for teaching and other positions in the Recovery School District. But

the vote proceeds anyway. Everyone knows that one of the agendas playing out in the room is the elimination of collective bargaining for the district's workforce.

Charges continue to surface that hundreds of children have been turned away from the city's charter schools. Many charters are already full and need not accept additional students. But there is also a flood of anecdotal evidence that the schools are turning away and/or failing to provide services for children with disabilities, in violation of federal law. Without a centralized administration, the charter schools lack the shared infrastructure to offer the expensive, specialized, and multifaceted services required under law. Neither is there a functioning enforcement mechanism.

What is emerging in New Orleans is a patchwork of independently operated schools, each with its own admissions procedures and policies and educational strategies. There are no schools that guarantee access to students living within defined neighborhood boundaries. There is no transportation provided to children who enroll in schools that are outside of walking distance from their shelters, trailers, or homes. Parents returning to the city and seeking a desk for their children must navigate this “new paradigm” alone.

May 18

The Orleans Parish School Board announces its plan to re-establish academic admissions criteria at the four schools they are operating.

As new schools continue to open and establish their own admissions and enrollment rules across the city, a tug-of-war is developing over high-performing and low-performing students. Each school operator — the Orleans Parish School Board and the independent charter boards — knows that it will be evaluated based on the academic achievement of its students. This creates an incentive to limit the number of students likely to be underachievers, and those requiring expensive special education services. Some schools are quickly filled to capacity by students whose savvy parents have registered them early and efficiently at some of the most promising charter schools. Other schools seem

to turn away students with special needs, claiming that they are unable to provide the necessary support.

As more and more New Orleanians return to the city, however, there is an indisputable shortage of seats for a large block of children whose parents were late in returning, have been unable to navigate the completely decentralized system, or have no transportation to access the process, which virtually requires school-by-school registration. These students, clearly left behind, are disproportionately the poor and those with special needs.

The varied independent school administrators and boards know that the higher the number of selective-admission schools that open, the larger the pool of low-performing students looking for seats. When the Orleans Parish School Board announces that it will seek selective-admission status for all four of its schools, the director of the Algiers Charter District threatens to establish similar admissions policies for all the Algiers schools.

Only the state-run Recovery School District — which is not scheduled to open until August — is required to guarantee a seat for all children.

By June, 25 public schools are operating in New Orleans:

- Four are run by the Orleans Parish public schools.
- Seven are charters authorized by the Recovery School District.
- Six are charters affiliated with the Algiers Charter School District.
- Eight are charters authorized and run independently.

June 14

The Recovery School District (RSD) announces that it must postpone the opening of RSD schools for the 2006-07 school year. Seven months after it is established by legislative mandate, the district has yet to hire a *single* teacher for its schools.

The chief of staff for the Recovery School District acknowledges that the district has only 10 people on its administrative staff. *One* of

these employees is tasked with coordinating special education programs, which require students to be individually assessed and placed. Some estimates are that as many as 2,000 special education students have failed to find seats in the city's charter schools.

June 7

The operating plan for the Recovery School District is released. Like the Orleans Parish resolution, it requires that schools chartered by the state admit a minimum of 10 percent students with disabilities.

June 12

U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announces an additional \$24 million grant to Louisiana for the development of charter schools.

July 1

The existing collective bargaining agreement between the United Teachers of New Orleans and the New Orleans Public Schools expires. Now, even those teachers working in Orleans Parish-run public schools are working without a contract. The Orleans Parish School Board makes no move to renew the agreement.

July 27

The Algiers Charter School Association, which plans to have a total of eight schools open in 2006-07, passes a fiscal year budget that includes a \$12 million *reserve* fund.

The state Department of Education issues a list of New Orleans public schools that will be opening for the 2006-07 school year. Of these schools:

- Thirteen are charters authorized by the Recovery School District and operated by independent charter associations, for-profit entities, national charter school operators or others.
- Six are charters operated by the Algiers Charter School Association.
- Two are charters authorized directly by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and operated by separate entities.
- Five are operated directly by the Orleans Parish School Board. Four of those are “selective admission” schools.

- Ten are charters approved by the Orleans Parish School Board and operated by a range of groups.
- Seventeen are operated directly by the Recovery School District. They are all open admission schools and must guarantee seats for all students who enroll.

August 7

Opening day for students in the Algiers Charter School District.

August 15

Opening day for students in the New Orleans Public School District.

August 17

Just three weeks before opening day, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education revokes the charters of three schools in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. The schools' partnership with a San Diego-based corporation that helps operate charter schools in several states has fallen apart over disagreements between the corporation and the local association board on issues including hiring and curriculum. More than 500 students enrolled at the three schools must now find alternative placements.

September 2

The Recovery School District pushes back opening day for several New Orleans schools that had been slated to start on Sept. 7. The RSD announces that it still has more than 170 teacher vacancies to fill. The state-run high schools are rescheduled to begin opening between Sept. 11 and 14. Several charter schools also announce pushbacks in their opening dates, citing delays in renovation and construction work.

September 7

Opening day for students in the Recovery School District elementary schools. Start dates for additional RSD schools and many of the charters continue through Sept. 18, creating a six-week span in school openings across the city.

Postscript

Taking advantage of disarray and inertia by local officials, and the willingness of the federal government to heavily bankroll its alternative

vision, powerful interests in education reform took the reins in New Orleans to recreate "public" education under a market model.

As the new school year gets underway, little relating to the K-12 educational process in New Orleans is clear, or easy. Students are still looking for places to hang their backpacks; parents are still crisscrossing the city trying to navigate a system that barely qualifies as "public," but for the millions of public dollars that have funded its creation.

Time will tell whether this experiment — with some of the neediest students in the nation — will work from an academic standpoint. The most recent studies of charter school performance around the country suggest that it may not. On Aug. 22, the U.S. Department of Education released a new report showing that traditional public schools significantly outperform independent charter schools.

All of the schools in New Orleans must release data on whom they are educating, what they are teaching, the qualifications of their teachers, and the academic achievement of their students. But the process for ensuring basic accountability is as decentralized as the "system" itself. It will be months, or even longer, before a true picture develops of how students are faring in the New Orleans schools and whether this new paradigm is indeed serving the needs of *all* the city's children.

So we wait. But no additional time is needed to assert that the dismantling of the New Orleans public schools has destroyed a slice of common ground that has been recognized for generations. That is, a system of public schools that promises to bind us together as a nation — even as we fight to make them better. Troubled as the New Orleans Public School system was before Katrina, what has taken its place promises only to further segregate the city's students — by race, by class, by disability, by talents and interests and gifts. No doubt some of these new independent schools will thrive and will build a base of public support and long waiting lists. Others will fail, either because of mismanagement or poor academic results, and cast their students out yet again to find somewhere else to learn. And almost assuredly, those children left

behind, by virtue of their still condemned houses, their under-resourced parents, or their individual needs, will continue to suffer because the market requires some to succeed and others to fail. The *real* vision — the real new paradigm — must be the old one: that a system of public schools, supported and embraced by the public, is the best way to provide *all* our young people with a quality education, at the same time that we build quality citizens and a common bond that transcends race and class and serves to unite a nation. Market-based schools will never do that.

...

The dismantling of the New Orleans public schools has allowed us to witness a radical transformation of American public education in a single city in a single year. But this transformation is not confined to the Crescent City.

Across the country the same “reformers” that engineered the dismantling of New Orleans’ schools are working to do the same elsewhere. As in New Orleans, universal access is disappearing into networks of schools that can *and do* shape their student bodies, that are minimally accountable to society as a whole, and that further sort, separate, and pick apart community. These schools continue to receive substantial public and private funding, while traditional public school districts struggle. We believe the implications of this trend are evident in New Orleans. It would be a mistake to ignore them. It would be a travesty to ignore the words of the young people and dedicated teachers who call us to a loftier vision.

