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The author, who lived and worked as a charter school consultant in post-Katrina New Orleans for 6 months, describes the evolution of charter schools as the predominant means of education and the challenges that chartering faces as a reform, raising issues of access and equity as central concerns. The article concludes by offering some solutions to the immense obstacles to developing an equitable and high achieving system of schools in the wake of Katrina.

What's Next for New Orleans?

Dirk Tillotson

Standing at the wrong end of a glistening handgun that dwarfed the pubescent hand holding it, and pondering the instigation of a “teaching moment”, I more wisely handed over the \$300 cash to the two teens who should have been studying chemistry or algebra. A strong arm robbery and aborted carjacking (probably because the kids were too young and didn't know how to drive) punctuated my time in New Orleans, a city on its knees, and a system of schools arising from the accumulated sludge of cronyism, corruption, racism, incompetence, and shared low expectations for many students.

Pre-Katrina the New Orleans Public Schools were among the worst in the nation. They improved in 2006, ranking second-to-last among the sometimes dirt-poor parishes of Louisiana, no enlightened wonderland of student achievement. Dozens of felony fraud convictions for school district employees leading to an FBI office within the District, a valedictorian who could not pass the high school exit exam and scored an 11 (less than random) on the ACT, as well as teachers who had given up on teaching, students who had forsaken learning, and schools that had been transformed into leaky holding tanks for a largely Black and poor student population, that was the majority experience for NOPS. There were islands of excellence, but even those found themselves submerged by Katrina.

Post-Katrina, New Orleans is faced with a brave, and arguably, new world of schooling. The financially and educationally bankrupt, Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), was stripped of authority over all the schools that

were below the state average on standardized tests (102 of 128 schools, added to the 5 previously taken). By legislation, these schools were placed under authority of the State-run Recovery School District (RSD). The RSD then solicited proposals for charters to run the taken-over schools. These were evaluated by a highly reputable independent third-party. The RSD, not receiving enough high quality charter proposals, reluctantly offered to open some schools as traditional public schools and opened others as charters.

Of those high performing schools that remained in OPSB, several, frustrated with the OPSB in general and particularly the slow pace of reopening, converted to charter status. Other existing charter schools mustered the fortitude to open by force of sheer will and community commitment. It is important to note, that these existing OPSB schools that converted post-Katrina were among the best schools in Orleans Parish, as they had evaded the takeover law. In the wake of Katrina, almost everything has changed. As school opens for the fall, by my count, there will be 11 OPSB overseen charters, 5 OPSB traditional schools, 18 RSD traditional schools, 19 RSD charters and 2 charters overseen by the State Board of Education (BESE).

The vast majority of New Orleans' public schools will be charter schools. The RSD is the major player in school oversight, and OPSB while retaining significant authority over a small set of schools has seen its responsibilities slashed. Furthermore, for both the RSD and OPSB traditional district functions are receding and the role of charter authorizer is ascending. Children and families have greater needs, employees are emotionally stretched thin as they try to piece their personal lives back together, and the traditional school support structures provided by a district (no matter how dysfunctionally) have largely dissipated. Meanwhile Districts are forced to take on new and unfamiliar roles. If this is the ecology of charter school proliferation, it is not a promising environment.

Chartering provides a politically convenient response that passes the buck of accountability down to schools themselves and arguably assures that schools will open quickly. In

essence it relinquishes control and responsibility for the day-to-day operations of schools from the state to private actors, be they non profit community groups or for-profit management companies. Charters are an empty vehicle into which all means of drivers can be inserted, and all manner of paths taken. And given the checkered history of "freedom of choice" plans in the South we should not assume that everyone wants to go down the same path, or even share their cars or the road. Thus decentralization through chartering can serve many divergent individual ends, but will it improve public education?

As a skeptical advocate for charter schools, I see the promise of community designed and controlled schools, responsive to students and families, with the vast potential to improve student learning and lives. As an experienced practitioner, I know that this promise need not be fulfilled. Educators design schools to teach, not to bookkeep, or argue over air conditioner contracts, and without sufficient business and back office support and training, and a variety of informational resources, the best made educational plans are undermined by organizational failures. And while I deeply believe in school choice for our most vulnerable students, who usually could benefit most from the best schools and instead are saddled with the worst, I know that often it is schools who are choosers of students and not the other way around. This creates the most perverse set of incentives, where the schools that are the fairest are disproportionately enrolling students with greater needs, which at some point is unsustainable.

I lived and worked in New Orleans for the better part of the last six months, performing needs assessments for charter schools, and attempting to formulate responses. What I saw was simultaneously inspiring and depressing, with dark clouds teetering on the horizon. Schools like Singleton Charter, deep in the 'hood, opened as quickly after the storm as was humanly possible, volunteers and unpaid staff preparing the facility, adding a grade temporarily so that they could get older kids off the street, and providing the only stability that its deeply damaged students and families had. In January, when I first visited Franklin High, in the affluent Lakeview,

there was a boat washed into the median of the road, unpaid staff were literally scooping mud out of the lower floor and surveying what weeks of ceiling-high, standing water could do to a library, not to mention servers. Within a week it was open.

Franklin, one of the best schools in the state, had chartered post-Katrina, to force its doors open. Visiting 6 months later, the boat was still there, and while the school was performing admirably, employees were stretched, millions in federal restart aid was just trickling in as they were preparing to close, and various other federal funds were nowhere to be seen, presumably because OPSB served as an intermediary in application and disbursement and they were incompetent in completing required forms. Similarly, Singleton, with a disproportionately disadvantaged student population, reported never receiving Title I funding.

Staff and community labored on, trying to respond to greater needs from students and families, while assuming greater organizational responsibilities as a result of charter status, in the face of decreased funding and operational support. We all reach our limits, and as a student of schools, the rubber band is taut in New Orleans.

New Orleanians are a resourceful lot and there are a number of school support efforts underway. Many charters have some type of institutional backing, which serve to consolidate business services and relieve organizational burdens on principals. Local universities, UNO, SUNO, and Tulane, are providing direct support, other community organizations like the YMCA and United Way partner with schools. There are also intermediary charter organizations like Algiers Charter School Association, which provides business and instructional support for a set of schools centrally, approximating a District's services. KIPP has admirably waded into the murky NOLA waters. Over barbecue and beers a principal explained how he had spent the day "accessing" shuttered schools, doing his own evaluations of suitability, in an effort to get the best school for his students, while, it seemed, the state was sitting on their hands. A variety of foundations, sometimes partnered with for-profit educational manage-

ment organizations have also emerged. Other nonprofit support organizations are beginning to address recruitment, business service provider matching, and leadership development. A friend described this as "ant-trail" rebuilding, courageous folks creating new forms to address immediate needs.

If these ant trails are to form permanent pathways that lead to improved student learning they will need support, for even now warm waters and old habits conspire to wash away hard-won gains. In the coming sections I will address the greatest challenges and suggest responses to these challenges

CHALLENGES

Systems of decentralization and choice, unmonitored and left to their own devices, tend towards inequitable results. First of all, the New Orleans Public Schools were one of the most segregated and stratified systems you can see in America, but that does not excuse us for not doing significantly better. Without some coordinated and honest broker of family information and an enforcement mechanism for discrimination, families will not be informed choosers, instead schools will do the choosing. This is already happening. Some schools have reputations for counseling out or discouraging enrollment for higher needs students. And others are bearing their disproportionate share. If unchecked this process will result in a race to the bottom in enrollment, where the most difficult students are shuffled into increasing concentration into the decreasing number of schools that accept them.

Furthermore as research on parents attending "failing schools" with a formal right to school choice under NCLB shows, precious few (3% or so) families make any choice at all. We need to engage these students in the matching process. We must also positively intervene, providing extra support for our most needy students such that schools that are open and receptive do not face counterincentives in bearing the entire accumulated burden themselves.

Schools themselves will magnify disparities in financial and cultural capital unless there is positive intervention. In theory school districts should play an important role in equity.

Without a redistributive central district, those schools with the most advantaged populations and supporters will have the greatest financial and cultural capital. Currently, one school was able to raise \$1.2 million in alumni donations and mobilize a cadre of skilled professionals to promote their opening. Another school in a more challenging neighborhood without an alumni list of lawyers was making by on donated backpacks and supplies. In a highly decentralized system these disparities will magnify, if unchecked. — both in terms of the resources schools will have at their disposal and the needs of their students.

While chartering does offer the promise of local accountability and autonomy through decentralization and deregulation, unless we take positive steps to support our most needy schools and students, we will likely see not the emergence of a brave new and improved world, but rather the reanimation of an old and tired, segregated and unequal system of schools, where the last increasingly come last and the first extend their leads.

The Louisiana context is unprepared to support the proliferation of charter schools. Post Katrina, students and families have greater needs, schools have larger responsibilities with fewer resources, and the technical support and regulatory environment are ill-suited to the emergence of charter schools as the predominant means of education in New Orleans.

The original Louisiana charter school law saw charters as an add-on to the margins of the educational menu. Now they have moved center stage, and will likely remain there if only for ‘political’ reasons. Originally there was a state cap of 42 on the number of schools; this number will be surpassed soon in New Orleans alone. The funding mechanisms are complex, sometimes relying on budgetary line items from the State budget, at others times relying on the competence of supervising Districts to complete required forms and disburse funds. Competence and good faith cannot be taken for granted, given the trickle of federal restart aid that was just arriving as schools were closing for the summer.

As responsibility over a range of business and organizational functions is reallocated to school sites, there is not technical support or informational infrastructure to support schools. While working admirably, the State Charter Association has basically consisted of a charter school leader with a full time plus job and a cell phone. Similarly at the State level, there was one hardworking, though overwhelmed, employee to handle all of the new responsibilities. At present, there are no set of trainings and no operations guidebooks describing the 18 wheels that need to be assembled for a successful charter school. As a result, many schools are reengineering each wheel themselves, as students are beginning school. The failures in authorizer capacity of the OPSB are legion, but one must also wonder whether the RSD has the capacity to appropriately supervise and support charters. Authorizers in a time of crisis cannot be dispassionate advocates that let the chips/children in the market fall where they may. They must set the context that contributes to charter school success and equity.

The legacies and deficits of the near and long distant past need to be dislodged:

All schools must grapple with the devastation wrought by Katrina on the psyches of students and families, aggravated by the almost complete erosion of traditional social support structures. Every measure of social and community health has deteriorated: medical services, day care facilities, and community based mental health support structures are largely gone. Every day in the paper there is some new indicator of declining quality of life. One wonders how much lower it can go before it rebounds. This is the near past.

Looking a little further back, a deeply segregated system apportioned opportunity largely according to wealth and skin color, buttressed by a political and administrative structure that toxically combined bias, cronyism, corruption, and incompetence. In such a system, student achievement for poor and Black students became a low priority, and the system overwhelmed individual teachers who tried to make a difference.

The education system in New Orleans has served many masters, but never the most disadvantaged students. When I was there, everyone and their cousin was looking for a job, and I was warned not to raise crucial issues for fear of alienating political support. Schools and their advocates can only serve one master, and that must be our most vulnerable and usually voiceless students. There are hard truths to be told and dark legacies to be addressed. If things are to truly change, there must be a realignment of privilege, a palpable belief in the capacity of all of our children, and a sustained conversation across the tracks that divide us. Instead, silence echoes in the Ninth Ward and cadres of largely privileged and White elites plot the course of the 93.6% African American and largely poor, former OPSB student population.

SOLUTIONS

Equitable choice support center:

Families and students must have access to accurate, digestible, and timely information about school program and quality. We need school choice fairs, interviews with parents and students, open houses, and the engagement of local community organizations. Families and children's advocates need school report cards that accurately report on the things that matter to them. And there needs to be a sustained conversation about school quality and systematic raising of expectations.

Students who are not engaged in actively choosing need long term education advocates who can assist them in choosing and enrolling in high quality schools. There must also be a tracking of enrollment and disenrollment and an accountability process for schools that discriminate. Parents need a one stop shop where they can get enrollment and school information, as well as learn their rights and seek independent investigation of alleged improprieties.

These are new forms, without precedent, as so much in New Orleans is. If school choice is meant to serve students and families primarily, rather than schools, politicians or management companies, then we need to focus on students and actively work to protect their interests. This

is truly the missing link in making school choice equitable. These informational and enforcement measures must be paired with a true system of supplemental support for students with greater needs that follows the student and approximates the actual costs of their education.

School support center:

Schools, development groups, the State, and the State Charter Association all need capacity development. This is a continuing crisis time in Louisiana, and for a transitional period of 2-3 years, dedicated technical support will need to come from outside parties or outside funding. There are a plethora of issues that need to be worked out both technically and practically. Ideally a comprehensive set of operational guidebooks and regular set of trainings and specific school support activities would be developed.

Since business/back office support and funding were identified as central concerns during my site visits, a goal of this center might be to subsidize contracting for these services with reputable providers for nascent schools, or even seek to create a nonprofit to actually provide these services and publish their processes and guidebooks as open source. This problem solving process should result in the creation of a set of suggested legislative reforms to truly realize the goals of charter schools, increasing student achievement for all students by giving schools the appropriate level of autonomy in return for the appropriate level of accountability. Instructional and leadership support and coaching would be delivered as requested and schools would be encouraged to share best practices and form networks.

This project would develop a shared open source infrastructure for charter schools, which would then be handed over to the State Association, or other nonprofit or governmental actors, these actors having become more viable after their startup period, and further internal development. The NYC Center for Charter School Excellence provides a good model, which should be pushed even further to create a 'wikipedia' of educational and organizational

best practices, as well as providing a trail through the maze of regulation and organizational development issues. Many of these resources are generally applicable and could provide for cross-fertilization with the traditional public schools.

Authorizer capacity building- Charter authorizing and oversight is difficult. To start with, there are fine lines between autonomy and accountability, choice and discrimination, and oversight and support. Charter authorizers will increasingly find themselves involved in these fine decisions with a bureaucracy that is ill-suited to help. This requires, either significant capacity building at the authorizer level, contracting these services out to a competent third party, or the creation of a specialized authorizing body or bodies. OPSB has already been accused of holding up millions of dollars in funding to its charters through incompetence. As more emphasis is placed on charters, more problems will arise, and without significant changes, students will inevitably end up bearing the brunt of poor authorizing.

Development of school and community based student support systems:

Given the immense developmental, mental and physical health, and academic needs of students schools need a social support infrastructure. Counselors, doctors, dentists, high quality day care, mentors and supplemental academic and recreational programs were all washed away by Katrina. We need a concentrated effort to seed student support systems and provide for their basic needs so that they can move on to learning.

FUNDING ANSWERS

All of these proposed solutions are transitional, where support would be provided to seed institutions, create organizational structures, and enhance local capacity. These structures would presumably be supported by legislative changes and local partnerships. Unfortunately, there really are no market forces pushing for the fostering of these conditions. Nobody will make

money helping poor parents choose schools, schools themselves are too busy sustaining themselves to create the organizational infrastructure, and let's face it, Louisiana is a poor state, with many needs, basically treading water right now.

Renewing New Orleans will take a commitment from the business and philanthropic community. We need a focused RFP process on the unmet needs of the region, and the partnering with national experts on implementation to rebuild a system that works. And we also need a strong research and accountability component, immediately for project-based goals, but ultimately for improving the lives of children and their achievement.

So this is a call to the philanthropic community (ahem Mr. Gates, Walton, Broad, etc.) — New Orleans needs you — as well as to social service providers, businesses, community groups, churches, and individuals. We all saw the children for days on rooftops, now that the cameras are gone. Will we abandon them to a predictable slide back into the conditions that fostered such catastrophe? We are not powerless to act; it is ultimately a question of priorities and will. And if the morality is not compelling, self-interest is also at stake, if you ever wanted to enjoy Mardi Gras or Jazzfest or visit New Orleans, you also want good schools, you want kids with hope, at home, studying chemistry or algebra at night. Believe me you really do.

About the Author

Dirk Tillotson is an attorney and school improvement specialist, focusing on charter school development and technical support. He previously worked as Senior Chartering Expert for RAND Education in Qatar, and serves as a developer and consultant for community based charter schools.

