

Bush administration uses Gulf Coast reconstruction to push for dismantling of public education

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Over the past four months, the Bush administration and sections of both the Democratic and Republican parties have used the devastation inflicted upon the Gulf Coast during last year's hurricane season as a justification to push through a broad range of right-wing policies. Among these reactionary projects is the drive to undermine the public education system through the promotion of charter schools and voucher programs.

The public education system has been under steady attack in recent years. The offensive kicked into high gear with consecutive budget cuts and was compounded by the passage of President Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative, which introduced competition between schools via standardized testing. Schools which fell behind on state tests were penalized with the loss of funds, or—as was the case of 102 New Orleans schools last year—taken over by state education boards. In many cases this was followed by the introduction of for-profit management or individual charters.

Hurricane Katrina has given the Bush administration and its congressional allies an opportunity to broaden this attack. This current offensive takes place on two fronts: one national and direct—the passage of a reconstruction education voucher program; the other regional and implicit—the fragmentation of the New Orleans public education system into charter schools.

The New Orleans parish public school system, barely solvent to begin with, has been thoroughly devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. After more than four months, only one third of the city's population has returned. The dearth of tax revenues has compelled the district to fire 6,939 out of 7,000 employees who had been placed on disaster leave.

Out of the original 137 public schools in New Orleans, only 15 have opened thus far. The overwhelming majority of these schools—13 out of the 15—have been given individual charters. Only two of the open schools continue to be operated under the direct control of the district.

Charter schools are educational entities that are independent from school boards and therefore also from much of the state and federal legislation that regulates them. Instead of actively working to revitalize the public school system with additional funding, the Bush administration and its allies are seeking to fragment the public education system by lopping off individual schools from districts and converting them into autonomous charter schools.

To this end, the Bush administration has provided \$20 million in federal aid to Louisiana charter schools at the expense of public school districts, while Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco has passed legislation that eliminates obstacles in the way of chartering

schools. Taken together with the New Orleans public school district's financial crisis, these circumstances have created a situation where charter schools are the best financial alternative for those seeking to reestablish public education in the city. The chartered schools are able to open because they can harness state and federal funds, private contributions, and volunteer labor not available to the cash-starved school boards.

While at first glance appearing somewhat innocuous, the propagation of charter schools is a component part of the attack on the public education system, corresponding with the drive for educational vouchers and the corporate management of schools.

It must be noted that charter schools, like the standard schools they displace, are not a homogenous lot. Different groups set up charter schools for different reasons. Certain charter schools are created to bail out districts in low-income areas and typically accept any students seeking admission—these have a strong tendency to fold under financial and organizational pressure. They are typically managed by inexperienced administration and face overwhelming monetary burdens. These schools also tend to be small and usually have a high employee turnover rate due to low pay and poor conditions.

Much more destructive, however, are selective-admission charter schools, which are not required to accept students with disabilities and draw the highest-performing students from the surrounding area, generally neglecting the more disadvantaged and poorer sections of the population. These schools usually have no problems with funds and are often subsidized by major corporations. They exploit the legitimate concerns of parents worried about the collapse of public schools, and the effect this has on the education of their children, to further drain funds from the public school system.

By polarizing the regional student body, selective-admission charter schools keep their costs low while consistently scoring higher on standardized tests. This produces a positive-feedback effect: selective-admission charter schools will consistently perform better than open-admission public schools, get more funds due to incentive-based funding for their higher performance, and continue to draw the lowest-maintenance, best performing students. District-run Public schools, the educational foundation of the United States, are set up to steadily decrease in performance and therefore lose funds to the point of insolvency. "The end result is the formation of a permanent educational underclass," a teacher from A. I. DuPont High School in Delaware told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Charter schools also possess a number of other tactical advantages for those seeking to weaken the public school system. First, in some

states, including Louisiana, private companies are allowed to operate publicly funded charter schools, meaning that chartering public schools opens the way for for-profit enterprises. Equally important is the fact that these schools are exempt from their respective states' collective bargaining agreements with teachers' unions, and are therefore free to pay wages that are as low as the market will bear.

The impact of charter schools consequently ripples throughout the educational system and out into the entire labor market.. With these circumstances in mind, it's no surprise that Wall Street and the Bush administration are rallying with full force behind charter schools.

It is doubtless that most of the educators, parents and other volunteers that worked to get New Orleans' schools open had only the best intentions in mind. However, they made the choice to open charter schools based on the availability of funds allocated in Washington and Baton Rouge. In a statement to the *New York Times*, a spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Education provided the rationale for using the charter model: "Federal money was available, and we were able to use it to get the schools open."

Last month, Congress passed a hurricane relief program granting from \$6,000 to \$7,500 per student to any school that took in students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Previous versions of the bill had included provisions that exclude schools that participate in "religious instruction, indoctrination, or worship" from receiving federal funds, but the finalized draft that passed Congress on December 22 has no such restriction.

Educational voucher programs are government policies that hand students a certain amount of money—a voucher—which is redeemable for tuition in public, private or parochial schools. The net effect of these programs' implementation is a further polarization of students based on class lines. Students who can pass private school entrance exams and pay the difference between the cost of private school tuition and the voucher's value—again, generally those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds—gravitate towards private schools while the remainder of the student population stays in "underperforming" public schools. Concurrently, voucher programs run counter to the First Amendment by channeling federal money directly to religious establishments.

In a duplicitous parliamentary maneuver, December's voucher legislation was tacked onto an unrelated defense appropriations bill that passed through Congress unanimously. The amendment to the defense bill, labeled the Hurricane Education Recovery Act, provides a total of \$1.6 billion in federal compensation to schools and is the first educational voucher program to transcend state borders. This legislation arrives on the heels of a 2004 law that initiated a \$14 billion school voucher pilot program in Washington DC.

In a reversal of his 2004 position, Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy became one of the most pronounced congressional advocates of the national voucher program. Ironically, the conditions under which the two federal voucher programs passed through Congress were remarkably similar. In reference to last year's DC voucher program, the senator bluntly stated: "The administration couldn't pass a voucher provision honestly, so they've attached it to an omnibus appropriations bill to avoid a vote to eliminate it." Kennedy's words might just as well apply to the passage of the national voucher plan, which he supported. In his attack on the DC voucher program, Kennedy hit upon something very important—the vast majority of the American population is quite justifiably opposed to educational vouchers. In fact, voucher programs have been voted down every time that have been put on the ballot as independent propositions.

It is as a direct result of this strong popular opposition that politicians have taken to sneaking education vouchers into law by hiding them behind other programs. For instance, Florida's voucher programs—one of which was recently struck down as being opposed to the state's constitution—were passed in the guise of creating educational opportunities for poor and special-education students. The DC voucher program was veiled as a scholarship program for low-income students. And, of course, the first national voucher program was passed off as hurricane relief.

While the Hurricane Education Recovery Act's proponents have taken pains to emphasize the fact that this law is only a temporary relief measure, it is obvious that a federal program of this magnitude opens the floodgates for further undermining the public school system while simultaneously weakening the United States' secular legal educational foundation.

The resounding theme of recent attempts to drastically reorganize public schools has been the cry that the "free market" is the solution to problems that are in reality caused by underfunding. The three alternate structures to the traditional district run-educational structure—charter schools, for-profit schools and voucher programs—all hinge upon the idea that the forces of the market and competition between schools will eliminate red tape and pressure schools to improve their services. This conception is thoroughly false.

The facilitation of public education is not generally a profitable enterprise, though the liquidation of public schools often is. This is why companies running for-profit schools tend to lose money until their initial public offering (IPO), at which point they invest their schools' assets, sell their stock, and make off with the loot.

The very market forces championed by the school-choice advocates are organically opposed to public education. To compensate for this tendency, the state must intervene. This is why one of the first laws limiting the exploitation of labor by industrial capital, the British Factory Act of 1833, was also one of the first laws that required children to attend school daily.

Once one gets past the political doublespeak, "competition between schools" boils down into an injection of the market's contradictions into the educational system. In essence, this is advocacy for the destruction of the entire public education system. It is entirely in line with the general thrust of the policy of the American ruling class over the past several decades: the elimination or curtailment of all publicly funded social programs.



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