

Report alleges systemic neglect of special needs students at New Orleans charter school

Tom Hall**12 March 2015**

The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted Friday to shutter Lagniappe Academies, a charter school in an impoverished New Orleans neighborhood, at the end of the school year. The move followed a lengthy report released last week by the state government exposing widespread corruption, particularly in relation to the neglect of students with special needs.

The corruption uncovered at Lagniappe Academies is only the most extreme expression thus far uncovered of the devastating social consequences of the right-wing charter “reform” pushed through in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Only six out of the 82 schools in the city are still traditional public schools. Most of the city’s schools, including Lagniappe Academies, operate under the state-run Recovery School District, which took over public schools after Katrina in order to convert them into charter schools.

Lagniappe Academies, described as a “community school” by its operators, opened in 2010 in the historically black working class neighborhood of Treme. Its 160 students are housed in six connected portable buildings in the parking lot of an abandoned grocery store, across the street from the burned-out remains of the closed Iberville housing projects. The school’s board of directors is headed by Ray Smart, president of the Smart Foundation, founded by the former publisher of *Esquire* magazine. The Smart Foundation had been involved extensively in charter schools throughout the country.

According to the report, Lagniappe Academies routinely fails to provide special education to students who require it and actively discourages parents with special needs children from enrolling in the school. Parents in New Orleans are required to go through a drawn-out application process, known as OneApp, to

enroll their children in publicly-funded charter schools.

Former staff claim that the school operates a “do not call list” to keep parents of special needs students from even applying to the school. In addition to the abysmal quality of the special education actually provided by the school, this contributes to Lagniappe Academies having some of the lowest rates of special education students in the city, around only 4 percent at the start of the current school year, compared to a district-wide average of 13 percent.

Administrators refuse to screen students for special education, even in cases where families had diagnoses from their doctors. In one case, a child with behavioral problems, instead of being screened for special education, was suspended for ten days. He was not allowed to come back unless his parents administered a blood test to prove that he was receiving medication for his behavioral problems.

The special education infrastructure at the school is virtually non-existent. One former staff member told interviewers that Lagniappe’s administrators said to limit the number of special needs evaluations in the 2014-2015 school year to five for budgetary reasons. The school has no special education classroom. During visits by state officials, the school administrators often moved furniture around to create the impression that they did have one.

Those special needs students who do undergo testing are often simply ignored. One teacher, referred to by the report as “staff member 2,” said that she was directed by the school’s administration not to provide accommodations to students with special needs, and then forced to sign a document claiming that Lagniappe had provided such accommodations.

A visit last year by the Louisiana Department of Education found that of the eight students at Lagniappe

with special needs, five were not receiving special education services in English, four were not receiving special education services in math, and none received speech therapy or regular progress reports for their parents, as required by state law. Two special education students received no education at all, and were simply shuffled around and left unsupervised for long periods of time. “They often slept or sat with nothing to do,” according to an affidavit by a former assistant to the principal.

Lagniappe Academies was also found to have held back students at wildly disproportionate rates, ranging from 10 percent in 2013-2014 to fully one-third of the student body in 2014-2015. In many cases, parents were not notified of the school’s decision, and proper documentation was often missing. Over half of those held back in 2014-2015 have transferred to other schools.

Despite this, Lagniappe Academies received scores that are at or above the average for the Recovery School District on the state-mandated School Performance Score metric in the past two school years. This is largely because the standardized test scores of students were either forged outright or falsely inflated.

Every layer of the political establishment is implicated in the present scandal. The Louisiana Department of Education was well aware of irregularities surrounding special education at Lagniappe for years, having released previous reports in 2011 and 2014. Just two months ago, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) successfully courted Lagniappe Academies away from the state-run Recovery School District as part of its ongoing battle for jurisdiction over the city’s charter schools. Lagniappe administrators were enticed by the prospect of having OPSB provide services that they currently contract out themselves, such as nursing and buses. They were also hopeful that the district would help them find a permanent facility.

New Orleans schools have been mired in scandal in recent months. Last year, the state filed nepotism charges against Doris Hicks, the CEO of the Friends of King charter group, which operates Martin Luther King Charter School in the Lower Ninth Ward. Friends of King has also repeatedly violated the state’s open meeting laws, including with a \$70,000 staff retreat to a casino in Mississippi. In December, Friends of King

voted to move Martin Luther King Charter School to OPSB.

On Friday, three days after the Lagniappe Academies report was released, OPSB member and former board president Ira Thomas was charged by the US Attorneys’ Office with accepting a bribe during his unsuccessful campaign for sheriff in 2013. Thomas allegedly solicited \$5,000 through an OPSB employee to fix a janitorial contract. Thomas resigned from OPSB later that day.



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