

# Ten years since Hurricane Katrina: Part three

## The privatization of New Orleans schools

Tom Hall

24 October 2015

*This is the third article of a four-part series on the ongoing impact of Hurricane Katrina 10 years after the storm devastated New Orleans and other parts of the US Gulf Coast, exposing pervasive poverty, inequality, and government indifference to the collapse of basic infrastructure in America. Part one was published October 22. Part two was published October 23.*

The crown jewel of the pro-corporate “reforms” carried out in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was the conversion of nearly all of the city’s public schools into privately operated charters. Under the pretense of improving the city’s ailing public schools through “parent choice” and promoting innovation in teaching methods, federal, state and local officials carried out the charter school “experiment” as part of a concerted, nationwide assault on public education. A major beneficiary was Wall Street, which considers charter schools a growth industry worth as much as half a trillion dollars.

Ten years later, the city of New Orleans has become the spearhead of the charter school movement in the US. While for the ruling elite this transformation has been an unqualified success, for the city’s working class students, parents and teachers, the results have been disastrous.

### The charter school “experiment”

In New Orleans, the ruling elite saw the chance to implement, for the first time on a mass scale, the charter school “revolution” for which it had been pressing for decades. The framework for the privatization of the school system in New Orleans had been established well before the hurricane, and had only to be implemented on an expanded scale in the aftermath of the storm.

The primary mechanism for the charterization of New Orleans’ schools was the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), established in 2003 by the then-Democratic controlled Louisiana state legislature. Ostensibly designed as a special “turnaround” district, RSD’s mandate was to take control of schools that failed to meet state performance benchmarks from local elected school boards and convert them into privately operated charters. To ensure that the RSD would be free of any troublesome democratic constraints, the district’s superintendent was appointed by the governor and the RSD was given only loose oversight by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which meets to discuss RSD’s operations only four times per year.

The original law applied to schools that produced test scores below state-imposed benchmarks for four consecutive school years. They would be returned to local jurisdiction after they were no longer deemed to be “failing.”

However, this was substantially revised in the months after Katrina to facilitate the takeover of the majority of the city’s remaining schools. Act

35, passed overwhelmingly by the state legislature in extraordinary session, arbitrarily broadened the definition of a “failing school” to encompass all schools that performed below the state average in standardized test scores. Thanks to this provision, RSD was able to take control of 107 out of the city’s 128 public schools after the storm.

While the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) was ultimately reduced to a rump by the largely state-led charter initiative, it was just as heavily involved in the process. Even before the passage of Act 35, OPSB had rammed through the conversion of the district’s 13 schools in the neighborhood of Algiers into charters, a move long planned before the storm.

OPSB continues to fulfill the function of de facto tax collector for RSD in New Orleans, funneling hundreds of millions of dollars into the coffers of charter schools in RSD.

Even schools that were not considered failing under the state’s standards were converted into charter schools. Benjamin Franklin High School, long considered the finest public school in the state, was re-opened as a charter school in January 2006 under the jurisdiction of OPSB and operated by the nearby University of New Orleans.

As of the 2014-2015 school year, there were only 82 schools left in the city, 35 percent fewer than before the storm. All of RSD’s 57 schools were run by charter operators, making it the first all-charter school district in the nation. OPSB, for its part, was the country’s second-most charterized school district, with only 6 of its remaining 20 schools functioning as traditionally operated public schools.

### Teach for America and the assault on teachers

Immediately after Katrina, OPSB fired its entire 7,500-person teaching staff, citing the hurricane as a pretext. Over 1,200 teachers were forced by economic hardship to retire, and 1,000 others, unable to find jobs in the changed education landscape, never returned to teaching in the city. Those teachers who were able to find jobs lost their seniority rights and job protections.

As a result of these measures, the local teachers’ union, the United Teachers of New Orleans, once the largest union in the city, was virtually wiped out overnight. However, outside of a wrongful termination lawsuit against OPSB (which was finally dismissed earlier this year), the union put up no serious opposition and has since focused its efforts on organizing low-paid teachers in charter schools.

The teachers in the new education system are, by design, younger, less experienced, and with fewer qualifications than before the storm.

A large proportion of New Orleans charter school students are taught, not by full-time, fully certified teachers who have chosen education as their career, but by volunteers from organizations such as Teach for

America (TFA), a national non-profit that provides a mere five weeks of training to prospective teachers. According to Teach for America's web site, fully 20 percent of the city's teaching workforce are current or former TFA corps members. Most teachers recruited by Teach For America are unable to cope and leave after a few years. Some 80 percent of Teach for America volunteers leave teaching after two to three years, compared to 50 percent for traditional teachers.

Nevertheless, Teach for America has been highly successful in recruiting a subset of its volunteers into leadership and administrative roles within the charter movement. Among of the most prominent of these are Dave Levin and Mark Feinberg, the founders of Knowledge is Power Prep (KIPP), a major nationwide charter school operation that has several schools in New Orleans.

## **Corruption and nepotism**

Despite the fact that New Orleans charters are ostensibly run as non-profit entities, there is ample opportunity for personal enrichment of charter school administrators and board members, not to mention profit for companies that contract with charter schools to provide essential services such as transportation and nursing.

As a result, RSD charter schools spent almost double the state average per-pupil on administration, while expending \$147 less on educational support and \$250 less on actual instruction in the 2013-2014 school year, according to the pro-charter Cowen Institute at Tulane University. (When compared to traditional public schools in OPSB, RSD spent \$1,345 less per pupil on instruction).

Typical of the social layers drawn to charter schools is Doris Hicks, the CEO of Friends of King, which operates Martin Luther King Charter School, the only remaining school in the Lower 9th Ward. In addition to her job with Friends of King, Hicks is a two-time appointee to the US Department of Education's National Assessment Governing Board, which produces the annual report known informally as the "Nation's Report Card."

Between 2010 and 2014, Hicks received over \$540,000 for her position at Friends of King, in addition to trips funded at public expense, including a \$70,000 staff retreat to a casino in Mississippi that allegedly violated state open meeting laws. This is on top of hundreds of thousands of dollars in salaries for six of Hicks' family members, for which Hicks faced nepotism charges last year by the state ethics board.

## **Statistical engineering of charter school "successes"**

A repeated refrain of charter school advocates, echoed in the media, is the claim that statistics "prove" that the charter school conversion has led to a marked improvement in student performance. There is, however, a great deal of manipulation of these statistics. The obsession of charter school advocates with "accountability" when it comes to public schools and teachers seems to evaporate the instant a public school is converted into a charter.

Since 1999, the principal performance metric used by Louisiana public schools is the statewide School Performance Score (SPS). The formula used to produce the SPS has changed several times since its introduction, in particular in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This makes any direct comparison between school years difficult, if not impossible, and this problem is compounded by the fact that schools in Orleans Parish were

exempted from SPS from 2005 to 2008, i.e., while the school system was being converted wholesale into a charter system. These facts do not prevent pro-charter think tanks such as the Cowen Institute from drawing sweeping conclusions from changes in the SPS.

The latest SPS formula includes categories apparently included to inflate the scores of charters. There is even a category called "bonus points," whose net impact has been to push scores for dozens of schools statewide, especially charter schools, out of "failing" territory. High school graduation rates have been similarly manipulated. John McDonogh High School was able to increase its official graduation rate from 34 percent in 2006-2007 to 90 percent in 2008-2009.

The actual impact of charter schools is concealed from the public, in part, through the use of carefully placed "studies" released to the media, which typically have little or no basis in fact. Last fall, the Cowen Institute was forced to retract a study, widely reported in the local press, that supposedly proved New Orleans charters had "beaten the odds" in serving disadvantaged children. It later emerged that the study's principal finding was merely a statistical artifact, something that could easily be recognized by undergraduate statistics students. While the executive director of the institute stepped down over the scandal, the institute made no public accounting as to how it could have released so obviously flawed a study.

## **Discriminatory admissions and school "choice"**

Before attending a charter school, students and their parents must first navigate an onerous application process, known as "OneApp," which is jointly administered by RSD and OPSB. Whereas with traditional public schools, placement is generally determined by "catchment zones" that assign students to schools near where they live, students applying under OneApp are given no guarantees as to placement and generally apply to three or more schools scattered all across the city. Priority is, in part, given according to the preferences of the individual charter schools, with the final decisions made via lottery.

The laborious application process places a strain on parents holding down full-time jobs, and the city's school districts have more often than not offered little help. Last year, RSD officials turned away hundreds of parents from their OneApp help center when the facility received an unexpected rush of people seeking help with their children's school placement.

Because students with special needs are more expensive to educate, charters have an incentive to weed out "undesirables" during enrollment and limit the quality of the education their special needs students do receive. One of the most shocking examples of this came this spring at Lagniappe Academy in the African-American working class neighborhood of Tremé. Lagniappe Academy is an elementary school run out of six interconnected portable buildings in the parking lot of an abandoned grocery store by a foundation associated with *Esquire* magazine.

Last spring, it emerged that Lagniappe Academy had systematically denied accommodation to special needs students. Two students were not given any education whatsoever and left unsupervised for lengthy periods. Meanwhile, the school's administrators operated a secret "do not call" list to screen out undesirable applicants.

Another special needs student was suspended and told not to return without a blood test proving that he was receiving medication.

By holding back students for arbitrary reasons (one third of the student body was forced to repeat in the school's final year), and by falsifying test scores, Lagniappe Academy was able to inflate its State Performance Score and thus conceal the disastrous impact of its policies.

## Preparing students for “the military, or worse, for jail”

Inner-city school districts in the United States have been described as “school-to-prison pipelines.” The rigid discipline that prevails within New Orleans charter schools leads one to believe that the ruling elite has simply decided to skip the middle man.

Spending on school security skyrocketed in New Orleans after Katrina. In 2006-2007, the first full school year after the storm, RSD spent a whopping \$2,100 per pupil on security, compared to \$46 spent by OPSB before the storm. During the 2007-2008 school year, RSD hired hundreds of private security guards to police its schools, fully one guard for every 37 students. Although spending on security declined in subsequent years (and school expenditures in New Orleans are on average higher now than before the storm in most categories), students continued to be treated as criminals in their own schools.

The huge security outlays are generally portrayed in the media as necessary to control “violent” and “out-of-control” inner-city teens. This hysteria reached new highs with the short-lived “Blackboard Wars” television series, produced by billionaire media personality Oprah Winfrey in 2013 on-site at New Orleans’ John McDonogh High School (“one of the most dangerous schools in America,” according to the show’s marketing copy). Future is Now Schools, the school’s charter operator, pulled out of the century-old school the following year and the school remains closed today.

Charter school students are frequently subjected to “zero-tolerance” discipline policies, contributing to astronomical suspension and expulsion rates. In the 2012-2013 school year, 14 schools in New Orleans suspended at least one fifth of their student body at least once during the year. In three schools, that number rose above 50 percent. Students at two of those schools, Carver Prep and Carver Collegiate in New Orleans East, staged a walkout in December 2013 in protest over the military-style discipline policies at their schools.

“We get detentions or suspensions for not walking on the taped lines in the hallway, for slouching, for not raising our hands in a straight line,” students explained in an open letter. “But walking on tape doesn’t prepare us for college [as the administration claims]. It trains us for the military, or worse, for jail.”

RSD schools move to expel hundreds of students every year, often on the basis of allegations as minor as carrying a cigarette lighter.

## The charter school “revolution:” New Orleans and beyond

Both big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans, praise New Orleans as a model for the rest of the country. President Obama’s signature education policy, Race to the Top, is designed to force cash-strapped local school districts to compete with each other for federal grants by opening the most charter schools. Obama’s secretary of education, Arne Duncan, went so far as to declare in 2010 that Katrina was “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans.”

The “success” of the charter school movement in New Orleans has been used to expand charters in cities throughout the United States. Detroit, the poorest big city in America, now has a majority charter school education system. Nearby Flint, Michigan, Washington, DC and Cleveland, Ohio follow close behind at around 40 percent. The number of students in

charter schools nationally has more than doubled since Katrina, from around 1 million in 2005-2006 to 2.27 million in 2012-2013, according to the federal National Center for Education Statistics.

The methods pioneered in New Orleans have also been exported abroad to countries oppressed by American imperialism. Former RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas (who previously served as the head of Chicago Public Schools), has reappeared in recent years in Chile, Honduras and Haiti as an adviser helping those countries dismantle their school systems and rebuild them along private lines, in Haiti’s case following the catastrophic earthquake that killed over 100,000 people.

The government of Honduras, following the 2009 US-supported coup against former President Manuel Zelaya, saw in New Orleans charter schools a powerful method for attacking the country’s own restive working class. “We’ve had a huge problem with teachers’ unions” in the aftermath of the coup, one Honduran official said in 2010, shortly after the government had signed a collaborative deal on education with the city of New Orleans. He continued, “Charter schools are certainly one option to try to solve the union situation.”

*To be continued*



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