

The Deceptive Promise of Charter Schools: A New Orleans Case Study



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Written by an anonymous Oakland after school teacher

The recent national fixation over charter schools as the solution to a decaying United States education system can be seen in a slew of big budget documentary films such as *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*. Major players in the mainstream education reform movement, like large philanthropic organizations backed by wealthy corporations, have constructed the image of the savior charter school and marketed it as the cure for a broken public education system. We are seeing these publicly funded yet privately run institutions spring up across the nation, particularly in poor communities of color like Oakland, New Orleans, and Washington DC. The debate is growing over this new brand of schools that lacks union protection for teachers, offers site by site administrative autonomy over budget, curriculum, staff hiring and firing, hours in the school day and year, and are often funded by large philanthropic organizations that are backed by corporations. Here at home in Oakland, the local dispute grows over the Oakland Unified School Board's decision to close 30 schools, with some of the lowest enrollment and test scores, in the next five years, as the number of charter schools in Oakland continues to rise. Many community members opposed to the school closures believe that there is a correlation between the school board's decision and the trend towards charterization of the district, while board members insist that it is simply a money saving measure. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the debate over charter schools and how they may affect Oakland, we must look at the birth place of the charter school privatization movement and the city with the highest number of charters in the nation, New Orleans,

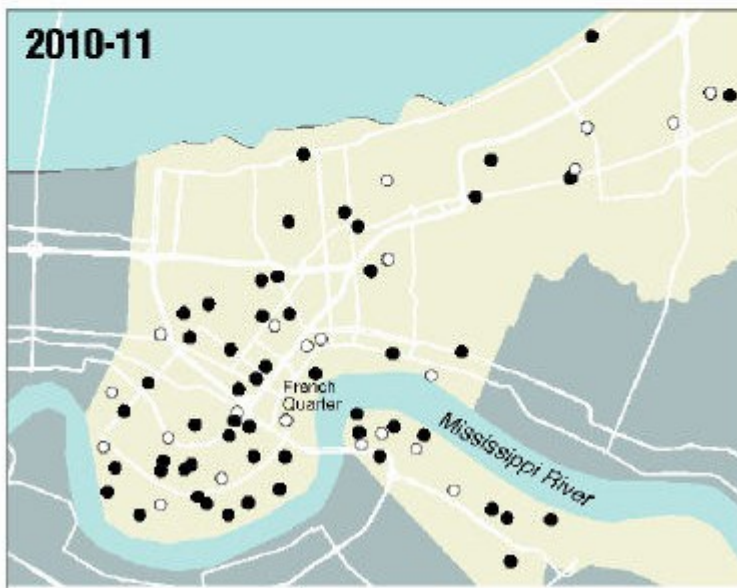
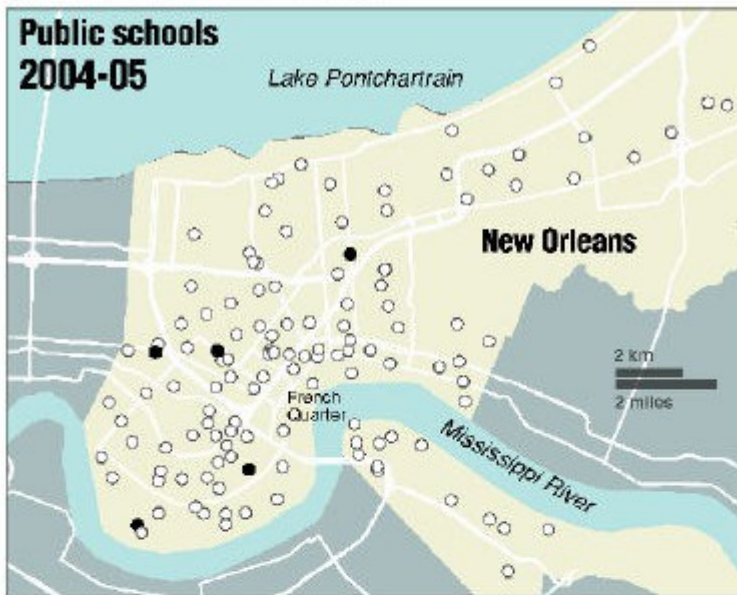
Louisiana.

A major critique of charters is that, due to their relationship to corporations and thus the free-market, they adhere to many negative characteristics of the for-profit capitalist market. Scholar Kenneth Saltman lists these characteristics as competition, choice, efficiency, monopoly, turn around, and failure.^[i] These aspects show themselves in the New Orleans charter school system through competition at all levels of this privatized and results driven structure: between traditional public schools and charters, students, parents, teachers, and individual charters themselves.^[ii] With this article I will discuss how each of these capitalist characteristics show themselves in New Orleans charters through selective admissions processes, teacher and administrative recruitment, teacher lay-offs, school closures, parent choice, union busting, racial tension, and overemphasis on test scores.

The conditions previously discussed began in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina. The storm was used as a catalyst to decimate what was once known as the public school system in New Orleans and replace it with charters. State legislation was passed that deemed all “failing” schools, be taken over by the state run and installed Recovery School District (RSD). Failure was determined by a School Performance Score (SPS) based on standardized test scores.^[iii] Paul Pastorek, the state education superintendent appointed directly after Katrina and the mastermind behind these reforms in New Orleans, used this opportunity to turn 107 out of 128 Orleans schools that constituted as failing over to charter providers.^[iv] Before the storm only 2% of students attended charters in New Orleans compared to 78% today.^[v] Many education reformers from outside New Orleans optimistically jumped at the chance to be part of this “education experiment.”^[vi]

The mainstream media and charter school proprietors framed the tragedy of the hurricane and the subsequent overhaul of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) as a positive “opportunity” to re-invent New Orleans’ educational landscape without regard for the already existing structure and the people that lived within it. The objective as propagated by Pastorek was to create a model that could be used in other impoverished urban districts across the nation.^[vii] Although the leaders of this charter insurgence claim it was not a predetermined scheme, the rebuilding of the previous public school system was de-prioritized when the Federal government chose to give \$20 million to charters over public institutions.^[viii] Some critics of charters see this rhetoric as propaganda shrouding the privatization of public education, as well as, an offense to all of those displaced and deceased due to Katrina. There is a sense that the historically mostly black communities in New Orleans are replaceable and almost impeding the development of this grand experiment in school privatization.

○ Traditional school ● Charter school



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In 2010, Superintendent Vallas told parents that if they don't like a charter school they can "vote with their feet."^[ix] This statement is particularly problematic due to the implication that the only community oversight for which charters must adhere is to individual parents. The statement highlights the lack of public say within these decentralized autonomously run yet publicly funded entities. The RSD has no publicly elected school board and thus the superintendent, who is legally required to be selected by a publicly elected board was appointed by Louisiana's Governor. ^[x] Therefore, without public input into who is running, approving, and overseeing these charters how can there be true community control of them? Author Leigh Dingerson calls this "challenge to democratic values" as an open "flea market of entrepreneurial optimism that is dismantling the institution of public education in New Orleans."^[xi] This is contradictory to the rhetoric that charters are at the forefront of advancing public education towards a more just and effective education system in the United States.

The Black New Orleans community, particularly the Black middle class that, before the storm, was made up of mainly teachers, has been adversely affected due to charter proliferation. 7,500 teachers and staff were laid off in 2006 after the storm, 75% of whom were Black while 100,000 New Orleans residents have yet to return to the city.^[xii] The termination of many teachers was due to the yearlong failure of OPSB to reopen schools after Katrina resulting in the expiration of the teacher's union contract.^[xiii] Linda Johnson, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's President, responded to the lay-offs by saying it "was the only way to eliminate the collective bargaining agreement and leverage the opportunity to start anew."^[xiv] One can draw parallels to the 2003 state takeover of Oakland Unified School District with its school closures, lack of union protection for teachers, and the subsequent move towards charters.^[xv]

With the teacher's union out of the way and so many native New Orleanians gone the trend in the Recovery School District was to employ and recruit majority white board members, administrators, teachers, and staff from outside of New Orleans. Organizations such as New Schools for New Orleans and New Leaders for New Orleans, affiliated with the leading charter chain Knowledge is Profit Program (KIPP), sit at the top of the charter system determining the course of these schools through providing a rigidly structured charter incubation system that trains, recruits, and funds administrators from the financial sector.^[xvi] The landscape inside classrooms is also changing on account of large federally funded teacher recruitment programs like TeachNOLA and Teach for America. In New Orleans, before 2005 there were only 10% new teachers and 73% of teachers were Black. In 2010 the number of veteran teachers had dropped to less than 46% and 40% of all teachers were white.^[xvii] Similarly, this trend can be seen in Oakland as the percent of African American teachers is on the decline and new white administrators and teachers move in to take their place due to gentrification, charter schools, school closures, and teacher recruitment programs.^[xviii]

Some long-time residents of New Orleans fear what this influx of transient white educators will do to the fabric of a once vibrant and tight-knit community. They believe that native black veteran educators can better support New Orleans' students because they understand their needs, culture, and history.^[xix] Veteran teachers are more skilled and better equipped to manage a population of students with trauma due to Katrina and pre-Katrina impoverished New Orleans. Nevertheless, the number of white first and second year teachers continues to rise due to no-experience necessary teacher recruitment programs, providing charter schools with a cheap, malleable, and disposable workforce.^[xx] Many of these new teachers leave, quit or are fired within a year or two. A concerned teacher spoke out at a school board meeting saying, "For students that no one wants to deal with, there's too much instability among teachers, which also leads to instability for our students...There's instability that then goes into the community. We need stable communities. Stable schools will give us stable communities."^[xxi]

This instability is seen, as well, in constant teacher turn around and charter and public school closures. In order for RSD charters to stay open students must be scoring high enough on standardized tests by the school's fourth year. The charters that end up being shut down, only to be replaced by big chain charters like KIPP, are often those with the lowest budget and not backed by large philanthropic organizations like the Gates or Broad Foundations. Furthering the racial tension spawned by the charter debate, many of the charters on the chopping block are run by black native community members who seek to gain more community involvement and control over their children's education.^[xxii] Recently Pastorek remarked on RSD's perpetual school closures by saying, "We put people in business and we take people out."^[xxiii] Inherent in this race to stay open is the ever prevailing presence of competition with in the make-up of the charter system.

Because the livelihood of charter schools is based on student success, the open-enrollment process

becomes a highly selective contest based on test-scores and student recruitment. There is pressure in public and charter schools, beginning with the Bush administration's policy No Child Left Behind, to prove their effectiveness and get funding through standardized testing.[xxiv] There is no proven correlation between rising test-scores and charter schools especially in New Orleans where the student body has changed drastically since the storm.[xxv] In fact, the recent reported increase in 4th and 8th grade test scores in New Orleans that was credited to the proliferation of charter schools actually began in 2003, before Hurricane Katrina.[xxvi] Moreover, standardized tests do not accurately represent the attainment of knowledge especially for children with unconventional learning styles, or the extent to which their education enriches and empowers students to be positive forces in their communities.

In this ruthless charter environment low performing, English language learning and disabled students become collateral damage and in the unusual case of admission for high-needs students, support services are often nonexistent. In 2010, both a due process complaint from 4,500 disabled New Orleans students and a legal administrative complaint from legal aid non-profits were brought against the Louisiana Department of Education.[xxvii] It is not just disabled students that suffer from these covertly exclusive admissions practices. Low scoring and behaviorally challenged students, the youth population most susceptible to poverty, incarceration, and drug addiction, are either discarded in the few decaying public schools left, the worst performing open-enrollment charters or they drop out.[xxviii] Julianne Hing of Color Lines Magazine puts it perfectly when she says, "New Orleans' aggressive reforms, which were intended to address the district's low test score rankings as well as deal with a persistent achievement gap, seem to have only re-inscribed the pre-existing inequalities." [xxix] How can charters claim to be assisting poor communities of color while leaving those with the highest needs out in the cold? The real concern for communities as a whole has been overlooked by large charter providers whose goals are self-interested.

In closing, I am confident, through analyzing the charterization of Orleans Parish School District's, that charter schools are *not* the answer to the preexisting problems in public education. In New Orleans the competitive environment has bred antagonisms within the once close-knit Black community in New Orleans, where students compete for spots in schools and parents individualism is encouraged over community solidarity and collective efforts towards progress.[xxx] The consequence of public money being used for private interests is that we, the community, have no real control over how this money is being used by Teach for America, New Schools for New Orleans, individual charters, the RSD, or corporate sponsored foundations. Although our current traditional public education system has many problems it does allow for some community involvement and control on a federal to local level through voting and union protection for teachers. We need to move towards a system that supports public control and input, because teachers and families know best and charters actually move us away from this goal. I am in support of small schools where teachers have the freedom to teach material beyond what is on the standardized tests, where all schools have ample resources for basic services, the arts and extra-curriculars, and where student empowerment is the end goal. Orleans Parish School District could be the face of our children's educational future as the presence of charters spreads in poor communities of color like Oakland. We will not see these types of schools in the charter frame work, which relates to education through competition, inequality, privatization, and humans, especially teachers and students, as commodities. Oakland has a higher percentage of charters than any other school district in California. For the sake of our children and the future of our society, is a charter district really what we, the people, want for OUSD?

[i] Kenneth Saltman, "The Rise of Venture Philanthropy and the Ongoing Neoliberal Assault on Public Education," in William H. Watkins, ed., *The Assault on Public Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College, 2012), 55

[ii] *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2008

[iii] Paul Tough, "A Teachable Moment," *New York Times*, August 17, 2008 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/magazine/17NewOrleans-t.html?pagewanted=all> (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/magazine/17NewOrleans-t.html?pagewanted=all>))

[iv] Kristen L. Buras, "Its All About The Dollars" in William H. Watkins, ed., *The Assault on Public Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College, 2012) 166

[v] Julianne Hing, "A Miracle in New Orleans Schools? Students Say Not Quite," *ColorLines*, November 9, 2011 (http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/11/new_orleans_students_who_raised_concerns_about_city_schools_win_accountability.html (http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/11/new_orleans_students_who_raised_concerns_about_city_schools_win_accountability.html))

[vi] Jay Mathews, "Charters Schools' Big Experiment," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2008 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/08/AR2008060802174.html> (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/08/AR2008060802174.html>))

[vii] *New York Times*, August 17, 2008

[viii] *Washington Post*, June 9, 2008

[ix] *The Root*, August, 29

[x] *New York Times*, August 17, 2008

[xi] *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2008

[xii] Bretin Mock, "The Myth The Charter Schools Have Saved New Orleans," *The Root*, August 29, 2010, (<http://www.theroot.com/views/myth-charter-schools-have-saved-new-orleans>)

[xiii] Sarah Laskow, "Necessity Is the Mother of Invention," *The Daily Beast*, August 26, 2010 (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/26/new-orleans-s-charter-school-revolution.html> (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/26/new-orleans-s-charter-school-revolution.html>))

[xiv] Buras, 176

[xv] Jacks Article

[xvi] *New York Times*, August 17, 2008

[xvii] Buras, 174-179

[xviii] Jack Gerson, Article

[xix] Buras, 176-179

[xx] John Thompson, "New Orleans Charter Schools Need to Respect Teachers' Experience, Students' Dignity," *The Huffington Post*, July 25, 2011 (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-thompson>)

[/new-orleans-charter-school-b-908171.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-thompson/new-orleans-charter-school-b-908171.html) (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-thompson/new-orleans-charter-school-b-908171.html>))

[xxi] Buras, 178

[xxii] Andrew Vanacore, "New Orleans Charter School Frustrations Reach a Boil," *The Times Picayune*, December 6, 2011 (<http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2011/12/new-orleans-charter-school-fru.html> (<http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2011/12/new-orleans-charter-school-fru.html>))

[xxiii] *New York Times*, August 17, 2008

[xxiv] *New York Times*, August 17, 2008

[xxv] *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2008

[xxvi] *The Root*, August, 29

[xxvii] *The Root*, August, 29

[xxviii] Buras, 172-174

[xxix] ColorLines, November 9, 2011

[xxx] Buras, 164

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