

Educational Greenfield: A Critical Policy Analysis of Plans to Transform New Orleans Public Schools

Michelle Early Torregano

Penn State University

Patrick Shannon

Penn State University

New Orleans is known as a unique city. It is the birthplace of jazz, delicious food, and a “gumbo” of warm friendly people. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina roared ashore, leaving death and destruction in her wake. As a result of that storm, the levees were breached and flood waters rushed in to cover 80 percent of the city. Over a thousand lives were lost, homes destroyed, businesses ruined, and schools decimated. Katrina is considered the worst natural disaster in American history. It dismantled an entire city, taking Michelle’s home and those of her family as well as the schools in which we worked and studied.

How does a city cope with such loss? New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin recognized that rebuilding the city of New Orleans would be a daunting task; one that he believed would require commitment from every level of government as well as contributions from the private sector. In the weeks and months following Katrina, Nagin invited civic leaders, businessmen, philanthropists, and educators to become part of the rebuilding effort called Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) and created the BNOB Commission. Its charge was to develop ideas and plans to restore and rebuild the city. From the Commission members, Nagin appointed an overall steering committee and designated subcommittees for education, urban planning, land use, culture, economic development, government effectiveness and health and social services. Clearly the concerns of these sub committees overlapped and Commission members were appointed to multiple sub committees in order to develop continuity in planning. This paper examines the work of the education group with particular attention to its plan, *Rebuilding and Transforming: a Plan for Improving Public Education in New Orleans* .

In order to address this report, I adapted the methods of critical policy analysis (Ball, 1994; Edmondson, 2004; Prunty, 1985) – an approach to policy studies that assumes that policy

is historically and socially situated and ripe with the values of its authors. Such analyses pose questions that examine the social, political, historical, and economic realities that define and shape policy in particular contexts (Edmondson, p. 8). In order to identify the values and assumptions within the dominant discourses within the final report, the study is organized around Edmondson's four basic questions: What is the policy? Who are the policy makers? What are the major tenets of the policy? and What are the likely consequences of the policy? Toward that end, we set a brief historical context for the Committee's work, provide a close reading of the report, identifying seven themes, discuss an invited response to the report, and then comment on the possible outcomes for New Orleans and the United States.

Historical Context

Prior to Katrina, New Orleans Public Schools has been characterized as “one of the most segregated and stratified systems you can see in America” (Tillotson, 2006, p.71) According to Newmark and DeRugy (2006), the New Orleans public schools were also fraught with political and financial corruption. Although the schools were desegregating for a short period in the mid 1960s, they began a de facto resegregation process almost immediately in which White families fled to the suburbs or moved their children to private schools (Bell, 2004).

By the late 1960s, African American students outnumbered the Whites by 2 to 1. By 2005, more than 80 percent of the students attending public schools in New Orleans were African American, and many schools had student populations that were 100 percent African American. (Rasheed, 2006, p. 6)

In the Spring of 2005, over half of the New Orleans students taking the state examinations scored at the below basic level in both reading and math at the 4th, 8th, 10, and 11th grade levels (Newmark & DeRugy, 2006). Sixty-eight of the 108 public schools were declared to be “academically unacceptable” by the Louisiana Department of Education. Delpit and Payne (2007) argued that these tests demonstrated that the New Orleans schools were not completely without success. “While Black students in New Orleans ranked at the very bottom in state scores, White students scores were the highest in Louisiana” (p. 20).

Federal and state investigators opened an office within the central administration building of the New Orleans school district in 2004. Their job was to account for the hiring practices and

school expenses because local newspapers had published a series of articles critical of questionable financial dealings. Their investigations resulted in over two-dozen indictments for theft, fraud, conflict of interest, and kickbacks. By the summer of 2006, 20 administrators had entered guilty pleas (Newmark & DeRugy, 2006).

In the weeks following Katrina, Governor Kathleen Blanco called a special session of the Louisiana legislature to consider the damage to New Orleans, with education as a top priority. Joined by state education leaders, she held a press conference to discuss her agenda for the special session.

I know this is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Now is the time to act, now is the time to think out of the box, and now is the time to turn a failing school system into a model for the nation (as quoted in Robelen, 2005).

The Governor proposed an immediate takeover of New Orleans schools based on three criteria: 1) the schools were in academic crisis before Katrina; 2) the majority of schools were considered academically unacceptable; and 3) the school administration was ill-equipped to address the rebuilding task. These criteria were new and bypassed the traditional review by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). In this proposal, which became law, the state would transfer all schools with student test scores below the state average to the state's Recovery School District for a minimum of 5 years. In New Orleans, this legal action shifted 102 of the city's 117 schools to the Recovery School District, placing them under the state and local school authorities (Capochino, 2005; Carrns, 2006).

As the result of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans citizens do have an opportunity to rebuild their school district and address its problems – segregation, achievement gaps, and corruption. The choices citizens make and the ones made for them offer more than a regional lesson about the future of public schools. Because of the national and international attention drawn to New Orleans during the storm and the slow and apparently racist response of the federal government, the choices made, and the ones in the making, point to a national, and perhaps, international future for “public” schooling.

The Policy

Many educators, reporters, and political pundits agreed with Governor Blanco that New Orleans has the opportunity to develop a state-of-the-art school system and to create a model for the United States (Capochino, 2006; Dingerson, 2006; P. Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Leonard, 2007; Robelen, 2005; Tillotson, 2006). According to Paul Hill (2005) in the case of post hurricane New Orleans, American school planners will be as close as they have ever come to a ‘greenfield’ opportunity: a large public school system will need to be built from scratch” (p. 1). Greenfield is an economic term that denotes a previously undeveloped site for commercial development. By using that term, Hill implied that the project lacks any constrain based on prior work or history.

The BNOB Education Committee met for the first time in October 2005, gathered data from over 1500 scattered New Orleans citizens, interviewed over 40 experts, and wrote a detailed 46 paged report four months later (<http://education.tulane.edu/documents/FINALReport...> The Boston Consulting Group assisted Committee members in gathering and summarizing the data. The Sub committee’s report *Rebuilding and Transforming: A Plan for Improving Public Education in New Orleans* was much more about transforming than rebuilding the school system that existed prior to Katrina. It’s model has four key components: 1) learning and achievement for all students, preparing them for college and life long learning; 2) empowering school with equitable time, money, and talented people and then holding them accountable, 3) establishing a administrative network of public, charter and private schools with a lean central control, and 4) making schools community centers with social services and recreation. “To succeed, our committee, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Louisiana Recovery Authority will all need to work together. It is critical that we endorse one single plan....” (5).

Committee Members

If policy is an authoritative allocation of values, then the backgrounds of the Education Committee should provide some insight into the discourses that dominated the discussions about the New Orleans schools. Mayor Nagin appointed 18 members to the BNOB Education Committee, announcing Tulane University President Scott Cowen as chair.

Cowen was also a member of the BNOB steering committee as well. Cowen is a professor of economics and business, and under his leadership as President, Tulane increased its

endowment significantly as well as closed its teacher education program. He serves on boards of directors of Newell Rubbermaid, American Greeting Corporation, Jo-Ann Stores, and Forest Enterprises.

Ron Forman is president and chief executive officer of the Audubon Nature Institute, a family of nine museums and parks in the greater New Orleans area.

Mark Granger is president and general manager of the local NBC television affiliate WDSU-TV.

William Roberti is managing director of Alvarez and Marsal, a financial development company.

Mary Garton is executive director of Teach for America of Greater New Orleans, a two-year voluntary teacher program for liberal arts majors.

David Waller is the global telecom solutions executive for IBM.

Kevin Hall is the chief operative officer of the Broad Foundation, which has the improvement of urban education as its mission.

James Shelton is the education program director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which allocated over \$5 million to cover the committee's expenses.

Neari Warner is the past president of Grambling State University.

Alex Johnson is chancellor of Delgado Community College.

Cecil Picard is the superintendent of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE)

Carol Wallin is the deputy superintendent of LDE.

Linda Johnson and Leslie Jacobs are members of the Louisiana BESE.

Phyllis Landrieu is president of the Orleans Parish School Board.

Mary Laurie is principal of O. Perry Walker High School.

Anthony Recasner is director of the New Orleans Charter School.

Father William Maestri is superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

A 27 member advisory council supported the Education committee's work. Nine members comprised a panel for expert testimony from Rand Education, Cambridge Education and the Norfolk, VA, Oakland CA, and Philadelphia PA public school systems. Thomas Luce, Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning and Evaluation of the U. S. Department of Education represented the federal government on the Committee. Since the report was published, Mr. Luce left public service to work for the Broad Foundation. All tolled the composition of the committee

members appears to be a delicate balance of private and public, business and education, local and national with slight imbalance on race and gender with more than half White (New Orleans had nearly a 70 percent African American population before Katrina) and two –thirds were male (to plan the future of a profession that is overwhelmingly female).

Data Gathering

To begin their work, the Committee developed a vision statement and wrote a set of beliefs. The basic rationale for reorganization was to attract people and businesses back to New Orleans. In order to accomplish this goal, the schools would be recreated as learner centered environments that care for the academic, emotional and social needs of all students, directing each toward post-secondary education and inculcating the principles of life long learning. There would be an immediate reorganization to include best practices by the top teachers available, leading to a dramatic improvement within three years and a complete overhaul by 2025. During the period, New Orleans students would score within the top 10 percent among schools in America through a clear and dedicated system of school accountability. This is clearly the language of American school reform since the *A Nation at Risk* report from 1983. The statement is well “within the box” of current school reform, however, driving the vision of nearly every school district in the country. Such plans lean heavily on the functional outcomes of schooling – post secondary and life long learning – in order to be attractive to businesses.

The process for acting on this vision statement required consultation with stakeholders (parents, students, teachers and administrators), educational experts, urban school performing well on standardized tests, and researchers’ familiar with the performance of New Orleans school prior to Katrina. With this information, the Committee would develop an educational network model that would drive redevelopment of New Orleans schools. Some of the consultations presented substantial problems and others required the Committee to make value judgments before these data were collected. For example, many New Orleans citizens were widely dispersed across the Southeast because their homes and jobs had been destroyed in the storm and their financial resources did not enable them to return to the city quickly. The Committee conducted a series of open meetings at New Orleans schools, held town meetings in Houston and Baton Rouge, and distributed digital and paper surveys to available identified citizens. In all, the report lists that more than 1500 stakeholders participated in some way. The Boston Consulting Group collected and consolidated these data in to “six aspirations voiced by all stakeholders”:

top quality schools in every neighborhood, qualified teachers, supportive environments for teaching and learning, safe schools, involvement of the community, and representations of spirit of New Orleans. To support these conclusions, the report includes quotations from stakeholders' responses.

The report offers little explanation concerning how the high performing schools were selected for review. Two decisions seemed to drive the selection process. First, test scores were to be the primary data for consideration; and second, schools experiencing reform aligned closely with the Committee's vision statement. Although these are not surprising criteria, they do not constitute a wide survey of alternative ways in which schools serve communities and students. Rather the Committee choices confirmed their vision as correct without evidence – standards, high accountability, standardization, and efficiency were “must haves.” Again, the Boston Consulting Group compiled these data and display examples from “highly successful schools” within not so successful school districts and school districts experimenting with such school reform.

The Recommendations

From consultations with stakeholders, high performing schools, and educational experts, the Committee forged ten key design principles. (Apparently, the experts confirmed the data from the other two groups because expert input is not represented explicitly in the report.) In the report, a Parthenon-like visual for these principles conveys the Committee's values nicely with the contextual features (distinctiveness of New Orleans) hovering apart from the principles. Safety is the foundation and standards are the pinnacle. Columns for support are made of access, talent, alignment, parent involvement, and efficiency with a header built from decentralized governance and high accountability. In a short paragraph following the enumeration of the ten principles, the report considers the New Orleans “cultural distinctiveness” which it characterizes as arts and music in the curriculum and opportunity to prepare for non-traditional educational opportunities in the immediate New Orleans region “e.g., trade and culinary schools.”

To deliver on the ten principles, the Committee proposes an educational network model, which folds smaller collectives of “charter, contract, and system run schools” into a loosely coupled centralized district. To make its point, the committee compares a network model with “command and control” and “all single charter” models, arguing that the former stifles

innovation and the latter lacks means for maintaining accountability. Without data or even testimonial, the report concludes that the network model is best for New Orleans because it enables a lean administration while ensuring accountability, provides economy of scale; fosters troubleshooting, is customer centric, and provides for student mobility. At the end of this apology for the network model, the report confides that the network offers the flexibility to handle the unknowns of the repopulation of New Orleans immediately and over time. The Committee predicts that the proposed network model will transform the look and feel of New Orleans Public Schools:

From students that underachieve to top 10 percent achievement of standards, graduation rates, and college and workforce readiness;
From different treatment of “haves” and “have nots” to equal opportunity for all students;
From schools below safety and maintenance standards to safe, well appointed and maintained schools;
From inequitable and inadequate funding to equitable funding highly competitive with other urban districts
From “command and control” organization to networks that work
From corruption to fact based strategies.

The report ends with ten steps to ensure these transformations. To begin, everyone must endorse the Committee’s plan and develop a six months schedule of operation. Legal matters must be altered in order to build the networks around charter schools and to reduce the central control. Various levels of oversight must be established including the transformation of the Committee into a monitoring body, the appointment of national advisory council, and an aligned school board. Finally, internal and external communications should be centralized and active.

The Values

The composition of the Committee, the process of development, and the report reveal a set of values at work in the design of new public schools for New Orleans. Rather than thinking outside the box as Governor Blanco declared, the Committee appointments, procedures, and outcome are well within parameters of school reform rhetoric of the last 25 years. The language of the *Rebuilding and Transforming* report echoes phrases from government (*A Nation at Risk*, *Goals 2000*, *America Reads*; *America 2000*; and *No Child Left Behind*), philanthropists (Gates –

small schools; Walton – vouchers and privatization; Broad – incentives for test scores), and business (the Business Roundtable). In fact, the Committee’s plan for New Orleans is nearly identical to the Business Roundtable’s nine essential element of successful schools: standards, performance assessment, school accountability, school autonomy, professional development for teachers and administrators based on standards, learning readiness, parent involvement, technology, and safety. Because there is little variance from this one size fits all business solution or the Committee’s initial principles, the Committee’s Parthenon appears to have been built before any data were gathered. The content of the report, then, contradicts the Committee’s declaration that “this plan was developed by New Orleanians for New Orleans” (p. 6)

Beyond this broad “what’s good for business is good for America” value lies at least seven more specific values: 1) schools are for business, 2) new is better than old, 3) private is better than public, 4) money talks, 5) experts are smarter than citizens, 6) white is better than black, and 7) flexibility is key. Not only does the Committee adopt business’s goals, but they also employ **business methods for organizing schooling**. First, New Orleans schools should “commit to a fact based process,” (p. 4) relying on bottom line data (test scores, efficiencies in expenses, and capacity building) to make decisions. Second, the Committee chose to “benchmark” (p. 6) New Orleans school against school systems that would find New Orleans schools lacking in desired areas. Third, the report rationalized the need for high standards upon business claims for increased educational demands of a global economy – “numerous economists have pointed out, we’ve reached a point where knowledge and skill requirements for further education, work, and citizenship have converged” (p. 16). Each of these examples implies that before Katrina the New Orleans schools ran on fictions, isolation, and neglect, using only local knowledge and history as their guides. Although facts, comparison, and conflation of private and public goals are classical market based criteria, they are not necessarily the way that business works in the United States in order to gain market advantage, particularly during the last eight years (Phillips, 2008).

In fact, the Committee projects the value that **everything new is better than old**. Granted, before Katrina the New Orleans schools faced and produced many challenges, but the *Rebuilding and Transforming* report has nary a kind word to say about the past. Committee members act as if the citizens of New Orleans (including several of the panel members) had nothing to do with the prior state of distress within the school district. Rather they imply that

only the storm could provide the opportunity for intervention. The report makes the new is better value explicit when it explains the anticipated fundamental transformation of the schools from disaster to nirvana through its plan. Were there no local successes to report, benchmarks to emulate? Were all the schools completely unrepresentative of New Orleans history, culture, and society?

Private solutions are valued over public ones in the report. Perhaps the most obvious representation of this value is the continuous reference to New Orleans charter schools as fundamental to any solution. Although funded by public taxes, charter schools do not enjoy the same public transparency as school district schools. Charter schools are designed as alternatives to those public schools, arguing for some unique element that legitimizes their existence. *Rebuilding and Transforming* permits local citizens and private contractors to apply for such charters. According to Dingerson (2006) even these modest rules were relaxed in the New Orleans schools after Katrina. Of course, this direction could be anticipated from Mayor Nagin's selection of the membership for the Committee. Mary Garton's Teach for America bypasses public certification for teachers and Rev. Masteri directs the city's largest system of private schools. Linking private solutions with business, the report recommends subcontracting many vital school services, including maintenance, safety, teacher development, and even, school administration.

The old adage **money talks** is evident in the plan. From the outset, Mayor Nagin announced that the rebuilding of New Orleans would be a public and private undertaking. Federal and state funds would not be sufficient to make the city attractive to business and repopulation. Various organizations approached New Orleans leaders in order to offer financial assistance, and the new entrepreneurs of disaster (Klein, 2007) applied for contracts in order to provide services that New Orleans civic and public servants could no longer manage do to loss of tax revenue and previous efforts to privatize such services. Each funding agency, public or private, stipulated on how their donations could be used. For example, \$21 million in federal funding was allocated to Louisiana for New Orleans schools, but was earmarked only for charter schools. New Orleans public school board vice president Lourdes Moran channeled some of these federal funds toward the transition of 13 city schools (which received minimal damage) to charter status with the Algiers Charter School Association as the governing body. Donations

from the Gates and the Broad Foundations also required that the fund be directed toward charter schools (Dingerson, 2006).

Across its representation of the selection of BNOB members, the gathering of information, and the decision making, *Rebuilding and Transforming* conveys the value that **outside experts know more about how to renew New Orleans than local citizens**. Presidents, executive directors, chancellors, and executives outnumbered the public school personnel 16 to 1. None of the Committee members represent the service workers who enable the tourist industry to flourish and whose children populate the public school system. Efforts to gather concerns from the dispossessed were meager, and they were handled by The Boston Consulting Group, a diverse and global consulting firm designed to develop competitive strategies in order to attract new business to a region. In the Group's hands, the data suggest that the public concerns aped those of business and experts. If this were true, then the experts and business representatives were not needed. If this is not true, then the locals were silenced or had words put in their mouths. According to the Committee's report, New Orleans citizens know little about education and schooling because the panel of nine education experts included only one from New Orleans, a child psychologist from Tulane University. The remaining members were from other parts of the country.

The report makes a fetish of the organizational structure for the "new" New Orleans school district, working hard to make its point that **public/private organizations are more flexible and capable than completely public ones**. The authors devote 10 of 46 of the document to a discussion of this structure – "one single plan" (p. 5; p. 38). Although the report calls for the schools to be directed by research and data, rather than history and tradition, it justifies its proposed administrative model without reference to research or data. Rather it makes bold claims borrowed from business models ("lean systems allow," "can facilitate the sharing," and "customer centric shared service model"), and then rationalizes the decision to adopt its model based on "the current reality of New Orleans." (p. 32). The current reality of New Orleans in 2006 was anyone's guess, and its future was (is) to be made. The uncertain future could be used to justify any system, particularly if data is not required. Derrick Bell (2004) argues that such flexibility in school systems has thwarted efforts to enforce *Brown v. the Board of Education* rulings across the country, enabling resegregation of schools and inequity in schooling.

According to the report, **the historical legacy of racism and classism in New Orleans and its public school system can be easily overcome by a flexible structure.** The authors make five explicit references (p. 5, 6, 12, 26, 34) to race and class across 46 pages. In contrast, the authors refer to charter schools over 100 times. All of the references to race and class are included in calls for equal opportunities to learn and to close the gap between white and black and middle class and poor. The strongest statement is ascribed to a “teacher” during the interviews – “the most important thing to me is that *all* children, regardless of race, economic background, religion, etc. receive the same education and access to resources.” (italics original p. 12) Throughout the report, the authors make statements about inequities and previous problems, but they do not explain why and how these inequities and problems arose in the first place or why they persisted across decades. Perhaps the most explicit example is labeled Exhibit 18: The New Model Will Fundamentally Transform the Look and Feel of New Orleans Public Schools. The descriptive column of the current school system lists underachievement, different treatment, unsafe schools, inequitable funding, command and control approach, and ineffective leadership. In other parts of the report, the student population is called “highly mobile,” “reluctant,” and “poorly informed.” Little explanation is given for the reluctance, mobility or lack of information or for problems that plagued the New Orleans school before the flooding. All that is offered is a declaration that high standards, a recommendation for more charter schools, and a commitment to a network model will bring marked progress in 3 years and complete transformation by 2025.

The National Coalition for Quality Education in New Orleans (NCQENO) agrees that race and class are neglected issues with the *Rebuilding and Transforming* report. Cedric Redmond, head of the Louisiana Black Legislative Caucus and Avon Honey, leader of the Caucus’s education committee, asked NCQENO to review *Rebuilding and Transforming*. Led by Lisa Delpit and Jim Randels, the NCQENO met with parents, teachers, community workers, school personnel, union members and local university representatives and concluded that the report was color mute, if not color blind. NCQENO concludes in their report (*"A review and critique of Rebuilding and transformation: a plan for world-class public education in New Orleans", 2006*) is not really a plan for public education because it does not address the central public issues of New Orleans – inequalities between Black and White and rich and poor. Rather the network model seems to encourage a private/public mix in which commitment to equity is not primary. As evidence, Delpit and Randels cite a neglect of English language learners or

special education students in the new plans, and the ahistorical treatment of issues of race and class surrounding the damage from the hurricane and the school district before Katrina.

The Likely Consequences

Although the NCQENO offers appropriate concerns about the Committee's report, Delpit and Randels stop well short of a critical policy analysis of the report. Their critique mentions the lack of commitment to the city's most needy and a slippery feel to the network structure, but they neither identify explicitly the values encoded in the report nor tie those values to larger political discourses. In this way, they provide a valuable service of those interested in New Orleans schools, but not an analytic tool to address the concerns they mention. Their critique implies that the Committee was forgetful or at worst neglectful rather than intentional and systematic in organizing the report with little regard for the majority of students in the schools prior to Hurricane Katrina. Delpit and Randels comment on the future of schools in New Orleans, but do not mention that it is likely to be a blueprint for other school districts around the country, and perhaps, the globe as the Greenfield metaphor gathers steam. After a critical policy analysis, however, *Rebuilding and Transforming* can be understood as a deliberate attempt to reduce the public sphere within New Orleans (and other cities) through the eventual privatization of public schooling according to neoliberal principles.

Neoliberalism, arguably the dominant political discourse in the world today (Harvey, 2005; Peet, 2007) seeks to further liberal causes of liberty, justice and equality without liberal solutions of large centralized social programs, trade unionism or restrictions on business. Rather, neoliberals believe that the economic marketplace when unencumbered by greed, traditions, or government regulations will eventually raise all citizens' standard of living to bring them out of poverty, dissolving all barriers to equal opportunity and preparing them to compete successfully in a global economy. Accordingly, schooling is the engine for securing the appropriate market conditions and for preparing workers for their globalized future. These values have been articulated in reports on American schooling and federal policy since the *A Nation at Risk* report upset President Reagan's conservative agenda to reduce the cost of schooling, to insert Christianity, and to offer vouchers for private schools at public expense. The Business Roundtable's Educational Reform Goals of 1989 and the subsequent federal Goals 2000, America 2000 and Educate America can be read in this neoliberal light.

Accordingly, when Hurricane Katrina apparently swept New Orleans traditions into the Gulf of Mexico along with many of the houses in the Ninth Ward where Michelle lived, neoliberal discourse rushed in to fill the proclaimed void in order to remake the New Orleans' (Bauman, 2004) educational system within its own image. The old was condemned without remorse and the new was promoted without evidence. Private and public funds touted private solutions. Likeminded experts were convened to rubberstamp neoliberal values as popular consensus. This manufactured consensus was packaged by a subcontractor into an attractive report for business and moneyed citizens. Loose networks that would permit continuous reorganization according to volatile markets were promoted, aping business practices of downsizing of administration with only the bottom line as the measure of success. And finally, poverty and racism were assumed to be simply aberrations of an outdated past that would fall quickly before the productive capacity of a network comprising these values mixed correctly. According to the discourse, decades of problems would melt substantially within three years and would disappear in seventeen.

Such logic and claims are beyond optimism; rather they border on outright deception because the wealth, income, employment, educational achievement, and health care gaps between White and Black and rich and poor have increased under the values of neoliberalism across the country and around the world (Phillips, 2008).

Before the BNOB committee was launched, Mayor Nagin met with members of the city's power elite in Dallas, TX to discuss what should happen to the city devastated and demoralized by the storm and the federal response. The Wall Street Journal captured the sentiment of the event as an insistence that "the remade city won't simply restore order" (Cooper, 2005). Rather as James Reiss, a participant in the meeting, explained:

The new city must be something different, with better services and fewer poor people. Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically, and politically...I'm not speaking for myself here. This way we've been living is not going to happen again or we're out (Cooper, 2005).

Members of the Louisiana Congressional Delegation as well as a member of the U. S. House of Representatives commented, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did" (Kay & Grey, 2005), and "It looks like a lot of the city could be bulldozed"(Garreau, 2005, B01). These statements seem to be more representative of the goals of

the neoliberal and its application agenda in New Orleans. These speakers name a city that has or will eliminate the people who are not needed in the current economy – those who cannot find work with a living wage any longer in a post industrial environment with limited service sector (see www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/rebuildng_new_orleans). Bauman (2004) describes such people as outcasts – they are understood as unnecessary for the economy to continue and their continued presence is a drain on the wealth of any city, state and nation. They become waste within the economic system, and Bauman argues that school reforms across the postindustrial world have become the “perfect” design to identify such waste and to make the process appear beneficial for the both the individual and society (see Giroux, 2006 for a further application).

Rebuilding and Transforming is designed to deliver on that intention. A loosely coupled network of charter and public schools distributed across a landscape with unequal infrastructures and a monitoring system predicated solely on achievement test scores cannot assure equal opportunities or comparable outcomes. Walking away from public transparency through a labyrinth of charter and private schools promises that those citizens with money and insider positions will receive the best service from the “new” New Orleans school district. In a plan that is expected to correct the problems of the past, the Committee’s rhetorical commitment to “all” rings hollow without explicit compensations for English Language learning, special education, minority or poor students. These are the students who were poorly served before the hurricane. Under these conditions that the report would establish, the “all” works as a marker for BNOB’s commitment to white and middle class and wealthy families, promising that if they will return to New Orleans, their children can enroll in well equipped schools with excellent teachers. These were the students absent from the public schools before Hurricane Katrina and these are the families BNOB hopes to attract back to the city. Note that one of the first charter schools recognized in the “new” New Orleans district was opened near the Tulane University campus (Education Committee chair Cowen is president of Tulane) and his faculty will have first preference for enrollment (Dingerson, 2006).

If the underlying neoliberal values for education drive the reports from the other BNOB subcommittees (and they do – Campenella, 2007)), then New Orleans citizens who are not provided for in *Rebuilding and Transforming* will have little public infrastructure and a modest safe net at their disposal. They will find themselves in a situation similar to the one they faced

when the levees broke. That is, they will have an easily identifiable need that most of the world can name – neighborhood schools that consider the previous inequalities seriously in order to prepare them as citizens who can contribute to the rebuilding of New Orleans. However, they will not be able to identify a public body responsible, capable or inclined to help them help themselves. Certainly, this is not the future that Committee predicted publicly in its report, but it appears to be the continued reality of New Orleans public schools – at least for the slowly returning families from the hardest hit areas of the city. Two years into the new plan and network, the challenges remain ("Leaders Struggle to Bolster New Orleans Schools", 2008; Nossiter, 2008; , *The State of Public Education in New Orleans 2008 Report*, 2008) Eighty schools are open; most are staffed with certified teachers and have “more” supplies; and some test scores are rising slightly. However, more than half of all students failed the promotion exams and remain in third, eighth, and eleventh grades regardless of their age; few services are available for the most needy; and the network organization has not quelled tensions between better resource charter schools and their public counterparts. And beyond statements about test scores, parents report little access to information about their children’s schooling.

This critical policy analysis of BNOB’s education report, *Rebuilding and Transforming*, concludes that neoliberal values directed the process and outcome of the reopening to New Orleans schools. The realities of these values in other environments have been that a few get rich (whatever the measure) while most suffer increased hardships. At this early date, New Orleans schools seem to be headed in this direction. If public schools are to serve the New Orleans public – the one that existed before Hurricane Katrina - then those values must be challenged at every level - in neighborhoods, across the city, and throughout the nation. To begin, New Orleans is not a Greenfield without histories, traditions, and cultures that should mediate any plans for the future. It is not simply nostalgia to insist that the rebuilding keep people in mind, and to ensure that profits are not valued over people. Although its schools have a checkered past, they are not a Greenfield either to be transformed into the untested image of neoliberal pundits without much regard for the majority of New Orleans citizens.

Perhaps the place to begin these challenges is contest the value that business models based on markets are the best system for addressing social problems. Subcontracting, small flexible organizational structures, bottom line accountability, and no regulation have not produced sustainable business or stable economies as neoliberal pundits promise. Rather

businesses continue to seek advantages within markets in order to make profits predictable, cutting costs regardless of social consequences in order to attract investors. Profit and dividends are their only responsibilities. Collapses in dot.com, energy, and financial industries, crony no bid contracts, and decades of stagnant wages provide the general evidence business models are not ideal for rebuilding schools. Freedom to choice might be a useful slogan, but it has very little to do with the realities of majority of people who see their incomes and the future opportunities sinking.

Second, the inability of the federal government to respond to New Orleans' needs during and after the storm should be sufficient evidence to question the privatization of public services. Halliburton, Bechtel, and Blackwater provide questionable models for rebuilding any society, and all are currently involved in New Orleans. The neoliberal ideology to rent its infrastructure from private business has cost more in funding and in lives. The lesson from Katrina and from Iraq should be that renting private resources are meant for private gain rather than public good. Disaster capitalism will not protect public interests. If philanthropic funding comes with neoliberal strings, then it should be questioned also. Their money talks, but can it be made to listen as well? Is there still a public sphere in the United States? In New Orleans? In the education field?

Third, issues of race and class must be discussed openly rather than hidden within the word "all." The hurricane revealed these issues to national and world audiences, who seemed somewhat surprised by the conditions of the some neighborhoods and the color of the citizens left to weather the storm themselves. But the flood did not create those conditions or determine who would suffer and who would be safe. These are historical consequences of race and class relations in New Orleans and the United States. Although reprehensible, the cynical responses that the storm improved New Orleans by reducing poverty and segregation (by eliminating parts of the city that will probably not be rebuilt) identified poverty and segregation as social problems. They made the issues explicit in ways that the Education committee chose to avoid. Poverty and segregation by race were and are major obstacles in building and rebuilding New Orleans and its schools. A more useful educational plan for transforming New Orleans schools would face these issues squarely and acknowledge that the only period when student achievement gaps narrowed in the United States was during the 1960s War on Poverty when programs for income, housing, and health care supported new school policies (Berliner, 2006).

Public schooling requires a public that can achieve collective benefits by mediating political and economic forces bent on control and profit. Educational researchers can participate in that public by taking critical looks at the plans and practices of New Orleans schools and those engaged in standards based reform. Naming the neoliberal values and describing their consequences in terms other than test scores can inform the public about hollow rhetoric and flows of profits within such systems. At the moment with the conflict of interest reports on the No Child Left Behind's signature program Reading First, the US Congress seems to be hearing concerns. But it will take much louder, consistent, and critical voices to get them to listen and act. In the meantime, the citizens, youth and children of New Orleans need our help.

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