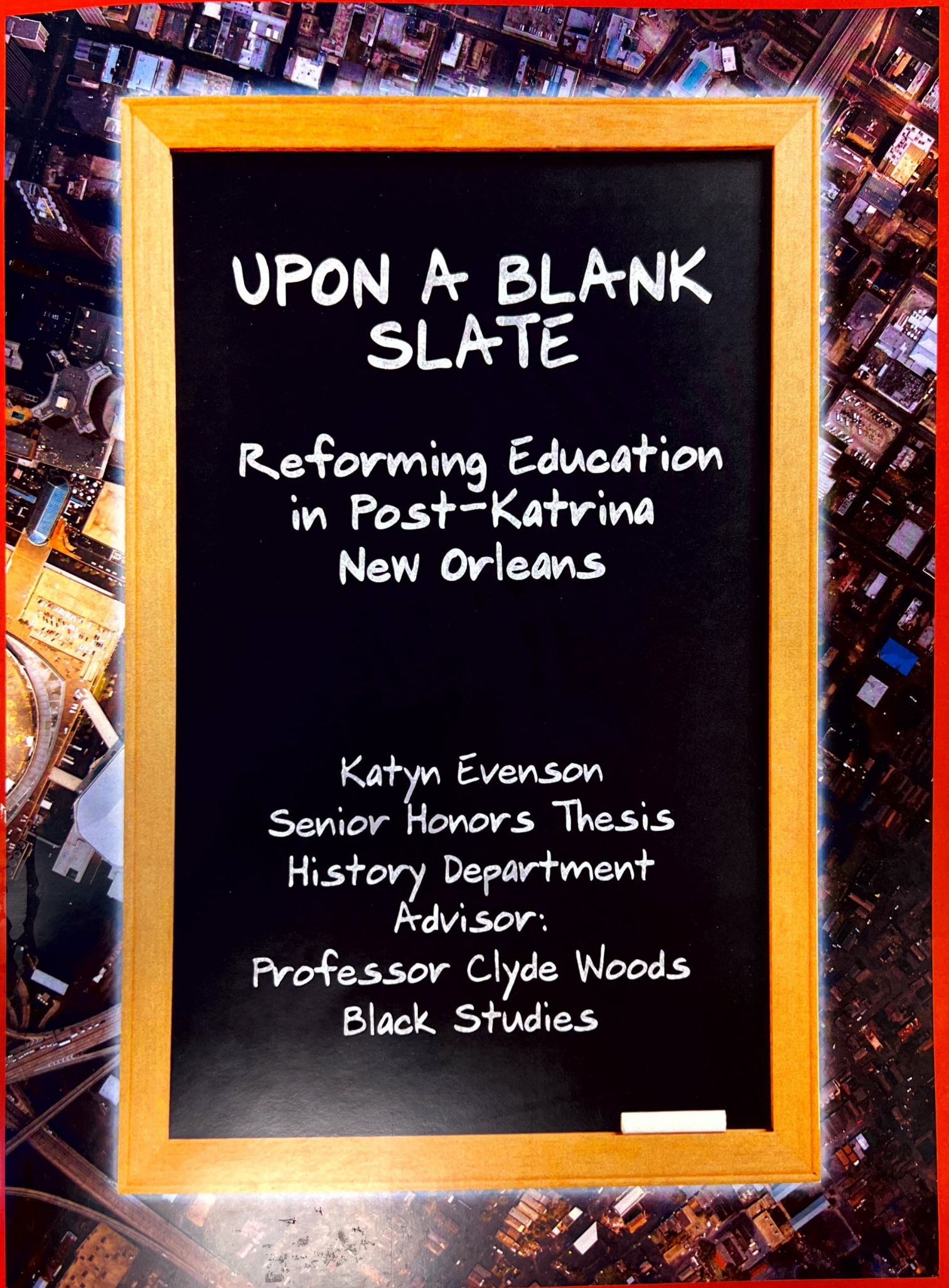

UPON A BLANK SLATE

Reforming Education in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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This is dedicated to my mother. Her support, comments and criticism has been invaluable. Thank you.

The moment one gives close attention to any thing, even a blade of grass it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.

Henry Miller

This project has been my blade of grass. As the education experiment in New Orleans is not complete, my interest only grows. All I can claim to have done is opened a can of worms for myself that I find extremely complex and important. I wait anxiously to see what will occur in 2010.

Contents

Introduction

At exceptional points in history, Mother Nature profoundly impacts regions inhabited by humans so that entire infrastructures and social systems are almost instantaneously dismantled. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States, including the historic city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Plagued by a failing school system and a long history of relatively unsuccessful education reform, New Orleans' residents watched in horror as their neighborhood public schools literally blew away. Some saw the empty fields left behind as reminders of the most devastating catastrophe they would ever experience. Charter School lobbyists and other groups interested in education reform saw a tabula rasa: a once in a lifetime opportunity to start a school system from scratch. These reformers knew, just as reformers in Louisiana had in the past, that the public school system in New Orleans was distinct in that it had a majority low-income, African American student population, and has suffered from mismanagement for many years under incompetent, corrupt and even blatantly racist school boards.

Policy is never created in a vacuum. Rather it is affected by anyone involved, the geographic and historic context, as well as by the prevailing social theories of the time. Educational reform is not new to New Orleans; rather its public school system has been evolving since its creation in 1841. This study focuses on reform efforts that affected or influenced the educational opportunities of African Americans and low-income residents in Louisiana, specifically, the Freedom School movement, Reconstruction era integration in New Orleans, Huey P. Long's education reform, the Civil Rights era desegregation effort and the creation of the most recent system up to Katrina. Each of these reform efforts dramatically transformed the

public school system, creating both positive and negative consequences for African American children.

Whether consciously or not, each reform effort over the years has utilized different theories on the achievement gap to explain why some people perform at higher levels than others. Historically the debate over the achievement gap has concentrated on the performance disparities between African Americans and people of other ethnic origins. More currently, the debate seems to be moving away from the racial explanations towards class-based explanations. I hope to shed light on how the current reform effort is utilizing different theories regarding the racial achievement gap in America and to what ends. Understanding how the earlier achievement gap theories, including the long dismissed theories of scientific racism, shaped previous reform efforts in New Orleans helps us to understand and evaluate the design of the current education experiment.

My second goal is to show how those directly involved in the experiment, including but not limited to teachers, students, parents and reformers, are responding to the current reform effort. A final goal revolves around determining if the reform effort has truly addressed the core problems of the previous system, namely student achievement and managerial problems. Doing so required me to travel to New Orleans and conduct interviews with as many people as possible that were in some way connected to the experiment. Despite great effort, it proved difficult to visit schools, especially the new charter schools, and to speak with their administrators. Bauduit Elementary School provided the exception and opened its doors to me, and their dedicated principal provided a small peek into the complex world of the articulation and application of reform theory. Meetings with representatives of non-profits proved easier to obtain, and from

them I was able to gain a greater sense of the underlying perspectives on the problem, as well as critical statistical data on the success of the effort thus far.

Many parties are involved and some even depend on this reform effort being a success. However, not all stakeholder groups see the effort's design or expression thus far as a success. Looking at each perspective allows for a more comprehensive midpoint assessment of the reform effort. Attention will be paid to the perspectives of teachers, students, administrators, the head researching party in the reform effort, the Scott Cowen Institute, as well as other interests, such as the state and charter school organizations. Each of these groups has particular needs, views on the problems of the previous school system, and opinions about what types of solutions are needed to bring about meaningful change to urban schools in New Orleans, and hopefully in future policy, the rest of the nation. In the end, my goal is to identify reoccurring trends in each of the stakeholder analyses and provide a synthesis of the various perspectives in order to provide a comprehensive and collaborative explanation of what really needs to be done in New Orleans and whether or not these issues are being addressed in the current effort.

New Orleans' public education system prior to Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst in the nation. Historically, reform efforts in Louisiana have utilized different theories on racial differentiation and the achievement gap to improve student achievement. Historians and scholars have long debated how to address the achievement gap and have advanced numerous theories. All of their theories have strengths and weaknesses, but too often reformers efforts try to find a single solution to the problem. The current reform effort is no exception. The current experiment is utilizing a variety of theories pertaining to the achievement gap to improve public education in New Orleans, specifically those that argue that efficient management and organization, as well as teacher quality are directly related to academic achievement. However,

a variety of problems still exist with the system, especially in regards to over-fragmentation of opinions about the effort and addressing the needs of special needs children.

My midpoint analysis of the experiment, with a firm understanding of achievement gap theories and the history of education reform in Louisiana, is needed to correct these lingering problems before the end of the experiment in 2010. In looking at the most pertinent perspectives on the reform effort, applying theory and weighing in any personal interest or bias that may have been present, the reform effort appears to be moving New Orleans public education in a positive direction. However, not enough has been done yet to solve the major problems that were exposed by Hurricane Katrina. I contend that the state of Louisiana should create a separate standardized test for children of special needs, so that charters will be more inclined to admit more of these exceptional children. New Orleans should also do more to recruit and retain veteran teachers, as they are the most qualified to teach in urban classrooms, as well as develop a bargaining agreement that gives teachers a greater sense of job stability. Lastly, the complete fragmentation of the school system as a result of the reform effort is a growing problem leading to inefficiency and waste. A happy medium must be found between fragmentation and over-centralization to avoid communication and financial problems in the future. Essentially, the current reform effort should attempt to counter the achievement gap on all possible levels, not just one or two. The children of New Orleans deserve a quality education in which their distinct needs are met in every aspect of their academic lives.

Part I – Understanding Racial Differentiation and Achievement Gap Theories

America is often described as a melting pot, a place where, for hundreds of years immigrants have come in hopes of obtaining a better life. The only people who can be truly described as indigenous to North America are those whom Anglo-immigrants deemed "Indians." The rest of the modern American population can trace their roots back to immigrants from a foreign land, with the exception of African Americans who trace back their lineages to people who did not choose migration. Rather, African Americans descend from those brought over to America to work as slaves from as early as the seventeenth century until the official end of the American slave trade in 1808.[1] How significant is the factor of voluntary versus forced migration to the United States? What effect did slavery have upon the condition and quality of the lives of African Americans? When slavery ended, how was white supremacy maintained? These questions can be more fully explored through an in-depth analysis of the history of racial differentiation and intelligence achievement gap theories advanced by social scientists over the years. It is clear when looking back at the history of the United States that the enslavement, and subsequent subjugation of African Americans under Jim Crow laws, were artificially justified with theories of inherent differences between whites and "others." During slavery and up until the Civil Rights movement, these methods of social control were staunchly defended as fulfilling the way nature intended the order of things.

Historically, African Americans have performed at lower levels academically than whites and other immigrant groups. This phenomenon is not a recent development but rather a pattern observed since Reconstruction. Since achievement levels were not carefully measured and

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[1] Roark, James L., Ed. *The American Promise: A History of the United States.* Forth ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009, 45, 382.

studied in the early days of American public education, one must look at how these types of comparisons eventually came to exist. In essence, to understand how an achievement gap emerged in the first place, an understanding of the prevailing social theory that enabled the enslavement of African Americans and their further subjugation must be clarified. Although the term "eugenics" was not coined until the early 1900s, theories of the biological inferiority of certain races and classes have been utilized to justify practices such as enslavement, denial of civil rights and segregation.

With what logic did whites defend the enslavement and later subjugation of African Americans? Why was this theory able to gain initial support and then endure in social institutions? The answer lies in the study of the history of the eugenics movement, which emerged during an era of scientific inquiry into almost every possible field, including social phenomena. The term eugenics refers to "the science, which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage."[2] This definition was put forth by one of Eugenics leading "scientists" and advocates, Sir Francis Galton.[3]

Racial Differentiation and Theories on the Cause of the Achievement Gap

Some historians link the emergence of the eugenics movement to the American Progressive Era, a time when an influx of immigrants and rural blacks to urban centers created a climate of chaos and change. Middle-class reformers believed that they could improve the circumstances of the lower classes, often from a "we know best" position. However, displays of

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[2] Winfield, Ann Gibson. *Eugenics and Education in America: Institutionalized Racism and the Implications of History, Ideology, and Memory* (Complicated Conversation: a Book Series of Curriculum Studies). Grand Rapids: Peter Lang, 2007, 5.
[3] Winfield, *Eugenics and Education in America*, 57.

eugenic theory emerged much earlier. Historian Ann Winfield traces the origins of eugenics back to religious thought, especially to Puritan beliefs and practices. The notion of a chosen or superior people, as put forth by the Puritan assertion of "a city upon a hill" is clearly echoed in the theory of eugenics, in that certain people are naturally inferior to others.[4] Further providing support for eugenics were the creative interpretations of Charles Darwin's findings published in 1858 in *The Origin of Species*.[5] At the extreme end of the spectrum, eugenics theory defended gruesome practices such as forced sterilization of "inferior peoples," however it also manifested itself in other aspects of life, such as education.[6]

In the South, "a continued desire to justify slavery prompted a proliferation of 'pseudoscientific' writers who attempted to prove African inferiority and incapability of advancement."[7] Even with the end of the Civil War and American slavery, ideas of racial inferiority continued to have support and political influence. Public schools in the Reconstruction South were administered and shaped by racial order ideology. Despite New Orleans' unique and brief experiment with integrated public schools after the Civil War, the rest of the South and eventually New Orleans defended the complete segregation of African Americans based on the notion that they were naturally inferior. In the modern era, new theories regarding the reason behind the achievement gap have emerged due to the majority of the academic community discounting eugenics reasoning. However, its persistence can be seen through the publication of such works as *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles

[4] Winfield, 47-9.
[5] Winfield, 50-1.
[6] Winfield, 86-8.
[7] Winfield, 71.

Murray in which they try to explain intelligence variations in races through statistical evidence.[8] Even the notion of standardized testing can trace its roots back to the eugenics movement, as social scientists perpetuated the theory that there needed to be an "objective" means of quantifying intelligence.[9]

Thus far, no modern research I have read has outwardly denied the continued existence of an academic achievement gap between certain groups within American society. However, not all of these voices agree between which groups there is a gap. Some argue that the achievement gap is a racially defined and others want to classify it more as a socioeconomic phenomenon. However, in the context of Hurricane Katrina, looking at the achievement gap from both perspectives is imperative. Nearly two-thirds of New Orleans residents are African American and sixty-nine percent of their children live in poverty.[10] New Orleans had one of the lowest ranked public education systems in the country. The children of New Orleans were not performing well on standardized tests. New Orleans is not unique in that it had a failing urban school system. Schools in poor urban communities all over the country are typically performing at low levels.[11]

Achievement gap theorist, Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy defines the achievement gap as something that "denotes when groups of students with relatively equal ability don't achieve in school at the same levels." Usually this is measured by looking at comparative accomplishments on standardized tests, school completion, college attendance, Advanced Placement achievement,

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[8] Herrnstein, Richard J. *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
[9] Winfield, 11.
[10] Robinson, Sharon P., and M. Christopher Brown II, eds. *The Children Hurricane Katrina Left Behind: Schooling Context, Professional Preparation, and Community Politics*. Grand Rapids: Peter Lang, Incorporated, 2007, pg. 41.
[11] Robinson, *The Children Hurricane Katrina Left Behind*, 44-45.

literacy rates, as well as other arenas of academic assessment.[12] Many research organizations and scholars have attempted to give different explanations for why this gap exists.

In her essay on the history of what education has meant for African Americans and on the racial achievement gap, Teresa Perry discusses two different possible explanations. First she discusses the theory of "cultural difference" which states that Africa Americans do not achieve at the same level as Whites because "the culture of the school is the dominant culture, the culture of White mainstream America."[13] One example she gives to illustrate this is the difference in language of African Americans versus the English of White people. Many other educational researchers echo Perry's sentiment. M. Christopher Brown II, T. Elon Dancy and James Earl Davis further the cultural explanation for the achievement gap. They discuss the history of public education, the fact that it was established by White protestants, and through the years has held on to "WASP" (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) values as normative and the standard to which one should aspire.[14]

The theory of "social mobility" offers another explanation for the achievement gap popularized by John Ogbu in the 1980s.[15] In his research, Ogbu discovered that cultural difference was less important than "the terms of the group's incorporation into the host society and the group's social position in that society."[16] Ogbu described African Americans as a "castelike minority" whose social status was ascribed at birth and social mobility was opposed

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[12] Holcomb-McCoy, Cheryl C. *School Counseling to Close the Achievement Gap: A Social Justice Framework for Success*, New York: Corwin P, 2007, 5-6.
[13] Perry, Teresa. *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students,* New York: Beacon P, 2004, pg. 53.
[14] Robinson, pg. 57.
[15] Robinson, 58.
[16] Robinson, 59.

by the dominant society,[17] in castelike minorities, members typically displayed a lack of "effort optimism." Put simply, one will not put in extra effort if they see little benefit from doing so. If an African American saw few examples in his or her community of people achieving a higher social status through education, they had little motivation to do well in school. Perry criticized Ogbu's theory for failing to recognize African Americans, from Frederic Douglass to Malcolm X, who have used education to achieve social mobility and overcame extreme obstacles to obtain an education or to educate themselves.[18]

Claude Steele proposes yet another possible explanation for the achievement gap: the so-called stereotype threat. The debate over the cause of the achievement gap has recently placed more emphasis on socioeconomic status than race. Steele contends that this view fails to recognize studies that suggest that middle-class blacks achieve at about the same rate as lower-class blacks, proving that there is an underlying racial component to the gap.[19] However Steele comes to a different conclusion than Perry. She argues that the "stereotype threat," "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype," causes the gap rather than "cultural difference" or "social mobility."[20] According to Steele, African Americans perform poorly because they know they are expected to perform poorly. This theory incorporates the threat of judgment and poor treatment. Under such threats the subject is unable to focus on the task at hand. Steele actually found that African Americans under stereotype threat were actually trying "too hard" rather than

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[17] Robinson, 59.
[18] Robinson, 14, 18, 63.
[19] Steele, Claude. *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students.* New York: Beacon P, 2004.110-11.
[20] Steele, *Young, Gifted and Black*, 111.

"not hard enough," in turn proving that they were attempting to avoid the consequences of fulfilling the stereotype.[21]

Most also agree that the achievement gap is not unique to New Orleans, but that the gap appears in poor urban communities across the country. Several theorists agree that the achievement gap is not the result of individual abilities, but rather the result of systemic and institutional racism. Discrepancies between funding, quality of teaching and resources all fuel a widening of the gap.[22] Mary Hatwood Futrell notes: "The United States must transform its infrastructure, especially its education system, so that at every level we are providing each American with the educational foundation to fulfill his or her responsibilities, as well as to realize their dreams as a citizen of this country and of the world."[23]

Rather than attributing the gap to a cultural difference, social mobility issues, or to the existence of stereotypes, Asa Hilliard III argues that there is no gap because we are incorrectly assuming that this is a gap between Blacks and Whites. He disputes this idea by stating that the measurement standard in the gap is White achievement, something that is viewed as normative, however compared internationally can be considered mediocre at best.[24] He states "the real gap is between Africans' [Americans] typical performance and the criterion levels of excellence, which are well within the reach of the masses of them."[25] Hilliard attempts to prove that there is not really a gap, however he inevitably does suggest that one does exist, but that it is in the form of an expectation gap between what is academically expected of Whites in comparison to Blacks. Hilliard suggested that expectation gap could be addressed simply by increasing the difficulty of

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[21] Steele, 121.
[22] Robinson, xiv.
[23] Robinson, xx.
[24] Hilliard, Asa III. *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*, New York: Beacon P, 2004, pg. 137.
[25] Hillard, *Young, Gifted and Black*, pg. 139

academic standards while simultaneously increasing the presence of exceptional teachers.[26] This idea brings us neatly into the next issue that a great deal of my research has addressed: the importance of quality teachers in urban classrooms, and other ways in which to address the academic achievement gap.

Solutions to the Achievement Gap

Achievement gap theorist, Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy argues that the solution to the achievement gap would best be addressed through a social justice framework in which school counseling was redefined to meet the unique needs of a multicultural student body. She argues that school counselors have the power to make or break the dreams and aspirations of a student and suggested that school counselors need to assume the role of student advocates.[27] According to her theory, a school counselor serves six main functions:

- Counseling and intervention planning
- Consultation
- Connecting schools, families and communities
- Collecting and utilizing data
- Challenging bias
- Coordinating student services and support[28]

Instead of merely helping to schedule classes or advise on a career, school counselors should serve as a mediator who addresses pressing issues such as prejudice, class conflict, and language barriers and proposes solutions to alleviate the situation.[29] She also insists that counselors must refrain from the "Blame Game" in which fault is placed upon the child or

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[27] Holcomb-McCoy, *School Counseling to Close the Achievement Gap*, 5.
[28] Holcomb-McCoy, 22.
[29] Holcomb-McCoy, 30-4.

community for sub par achievement. This ideology reflects the belief that the achievement gap is a socially produced phenomenon, rather than the result of inherent inferiority of individuals or a culture.[30] Holcomb-McCoy's approach would undoubtedly help the children of Katrina in that they have undergone extensive trauma and are living in communities that are trying to rebuild and redevelop their public school systems.

No one disputes that a credentialed, experienced and caring teacher will be more successful in raising the level of achievement of his or her students than one who is under-motivated, overwhelmed and inexperienced. Why is it then that the majority of teachers in poor and minority classrooms are the latter? In my research, many of the education researchers and scholars view raising teacher quality as a main means to counteract the achievement gap. However, researchers disagree on what should qualify a certified teacher and how to assess teacher quality. Ira Lit and Jon Snyder cite important questions about teaching raised by the NCTAF, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, including what matters most about teaching, the best recruiting and retention strategies, preparation and support systems, school organization and reward and compensation.[31] Lit and Snyder developed a new educational model for a post-Katrina New Orleans in which teachers are paid more depending on the amount of responsibility they take on, encouraging interest in taking on leadership roles.[32] Similarly, achievement gap theorist, Linda Schaak Distad outlined eight essential characteristics of a teacher leader, including but not limited to commitment to the values of justice and caring, willingness to take risks, an ability to inspire hope, and teaching with a positive disposition.[33] Both of these authors argue that a teacher is more than just someone who is knowledgeable about

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[30] Holcomb-McCoy, 67.
[31] Robinson, 96.
[32] Robinson, 97.
[33] Robinson, 121-27.

the given subject matter, but rather someone who inspires, instills a love of learning, and is responsive to the inevitable differences a teacher of urban students will find in his or her students. This notion of inherent differences, whether cultural, socioeconomic, ideological, or in intellectual ability is a crucial element in the research concerning urban education.

Several researchers see raising teachers' "cultural competence" as one of the best strategies to addressing the achievement in the classroom. Distad states, "Culturally relevant and transformative teachers need a clear sense of who they are and what they represent."[34] Teachers need to acknowledge and celebrate cultural differences not only within the student body, but also within themselves. Alicia L. Moore examines the importance of a culturally relevant education, especially in the classrooms around the country that assimilated the displaced students of New Orleans. She defines multiculturalism as "a concept that encourages schools to provide appropriate and equal opportunities for all students to learn regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or gender." She goes further to explain the basic tenets of multiculturalism as "the diversification of content, contexts, and techniques used to facilitate learning so that instructional strategies better reflect the ethnic, cultural and social diversity of society." Moore also argues that a "color blind" approach to addressing difference only perpetuates the problem of institutional and veiled racism.[35] Teresa Perry refers to a multicultural education as "culturally responsive pedagogy" which she defines as "pedagogy based on knowledge of and sensitivity to the culturally learned communication styles that students of color brought to school."[36]

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[34] Robinson, 121.
[35] Moore, A. L. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: The Importance of Multiculturalism in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. *"Multicultural Education* v. 15 no. 2 (Winter 2007), p. 24-30
[36] Perry, *Young, Gifted and Black*, 55.

Thomas Sowell, a noted African American conservative economist, who has voiced controversial viewpoints on everything from urban education to gay rights, argues against a multiculturalism curriculum, there simply isn't enough time to study other cultures.[37] Rather Sowell believes that more funding and higher teacher quality education is sufficient in addressing the achievement gap. He also argues against affirmative action, and even school desegregation.[38] After reading his views I have come to the conclusion that he is a bit of a sensationalist and does not provide enough evidence to support his controversial conclusions.

Several researchers deal extensively with the education of children who experience trauma as a result of living through a natural disaster. Clyde Winters argues for a national policy to address the issue of displaced children. One of the symptoms evacuee students experience after a natural disaster is the "feeling of being lost." Children often suffer from mental disorders including "post-traumatic stress syndrome, acute stress disorders, and distress symptoms." Winters believes that one of the best ways to address these issues is through education, which provides a major stabilizing force in a child's life.[39] In other words, even after a major disaster such as Katrina, students can be assured that even though all else is uncertain, school will always be there. Geneva Gay, renowned educational researcher, also argues for an "aggressive" policy that will address the issue of educating children of disaster. She combines the notion that these displaced children will often find themselves entering unfamiliar educational settings in which they will encounter "hegemonic" communities who fail to acknowledge the cultural and experiential differences between their regular student body and their new evacuees. She also

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[37] Sowell, Thomas. "Multicultural Education." http://www.tsowell.com/speducat.html#copy.
[38] Sowell, Thomas. *Education, Assumptions vs. History: Collected Papers.* New York: Hoover Institution P, 1985, 48, 80.
[39] Winters, C. "Planning for Disaster: Education Policy in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina," *Multicultural Education* v. 15 no. 2 (Winter 2007), p. 39-42.

calls for institutional change, a need for multicultural education and special programs such as psychological counseling for children who are poor, a minority, and in the case of New Orleans, displaced and homeless.[40]

The next chapter will outline the history of major school reform efforts in Louisiana, paying specific attention to New Orleans when applicable, while showing how reform efforts have applied different theories of racial differentiation and the achievement gap.

[40] Gay, G, "Teaching Children of Catastrophe," *The Education Digest* v. 73 no. 9 (May 2008), 40-4.

Part II: A History of Education Reform in Louisiana

The current reform effort in New Orleans is not the first attempt to dramatically change the face and model of its urban school system, and I doubt it will be the last. This brief historical account of previous reform efforts illuminates how the current experiment has both built upon and departed from earlier school reforms as well as how different theories of the achievement gap have changed over time. From Freedom Schools and early trials with integration, to re-segregation and the bitter Civil Rights era battle to end the practice, educational reform in Louisiana has been shaped by the prevailing social theories of each era. African Americans looking to gain a quality education found it difficult to overcome the deeply ingrained institutional racism that has kept them from receiving a quality education. Segregation, inadequate resources, and inferior education are just some of the effects institutional racism had upon educational reform efforts. Arguably, this deep seeded racism and subscription to the theory of racial differentiation has been countered by some attempts to apply other theories, such as greater access to resources and stressing teacher quality, however it was not until after Katrina's destruction that many of the problems creating an achievement gap were revealed and reformers stepped in to dramatically change the educational landscape of New Orleans.

Freedom Schools in Louisiana

The Civil War halted any major reforms or efforts to improve public education in Louisiana. Most schools in rural parishes closed due to a reallocation of funds from most social services to the war effort. During the Civil War, a dual system of school management emerged in Louisiana under orders from Confederate federal authorities as well as from the state

superintendent. Voices of protest could be heard during this time regarding the education of African Americans. One African American soldier, who served as Superintendent of Negro Labor in New Orleans, demanded not only that his enslaved children be released from servitude, but also that his service in the Confederate army had surely won him the right to educate his children.[41] Early examples of racial differentiation theories, namely eugenics and the notion of 'Education for Freedom', are observable in the ways in which African Americans won their education, how they were educated and what forms of protest they encountered.

The end of the war brought a change in state leadership, from Confederate control to a new Northern mandated regime. Major advances, especially in terms of the education of formally enslaved African Americans occurred, however not all of the reforms reflected the interests of the African American community. Due to early Union control of several southern states, including Louisiana, African Americans were given a "head start on openly seeking an education."[42] Even with the end of the war and the start of the Reconstruction, white support for public education for *both* whites and blacks, something the constitution of 1868 provided for, proved weak.[43] In articles from an African American newspaper *The New Orleans Tribune* in the 1860s, prominent African Americans advocated for the admission of blacks to white schools rather than a creation of a separate school system in the form of Freedom Schools.[44] Despite some black and much white opposition, Northern reformers established a series of "Freedman

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[41] Williams, Heather A. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina P, 2005, 70.
[42] Williams, *Self-Taught*, 100.
[43] Sutton, Charles E., Charles L. Foxworth, and Robert E. Hearn. *Louisiana's Story on Public Education.* Ruston, LA: Bureau of Educational Research and Publications: College of Education, Louisiana Tech University, 1971, 4.
[44] "No Colored Schools - Public Schools for All." *The New Orleans Tribune*, July 24,1867: 1.

Schools" to educate and acculturate formally enslaved African Americans, thanks largely to the petitioning and protests by the large Creole population in Louisiana.[45]

On March 3, 1865, Congress established the Bureau of the Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. The purpose of this new federal commission was to regulate all public aspects of the lives of the newly freed slaves. [46] One of the most important functions of the Freedman's Bureau was providing a system of education for former slaves. African Americans viewed education as a necessary component to becoming an independent American citizen.[47] Internet sources claim the existence of a Freedman's school in New Orleans, however historical accounts of the existence of the school did not exist in the collections or sources upon which I based my research.[48]

Use of a historical account of another Louisiana parishes' Freedman schools is essential to supplement the lack of research on Freedman schools in New Orleans and is critical to understanding the prevailing theories and beliefs regarding the education of African Americans during Reconstruction.

Susan Dollar's work focuses on the Freedman schools of the Natchitoches Parish in Louisiana, but it can be presumed that many of the actions undertaken in regards to African American education were similar to those taken in New Orleans Parishes. She described "white distrust and black expectations" as the major obstacles to the success of Freedman schools in

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[45] Baker, Liva. *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996, 14.
[46] Dollar, Susan E. *The Freedman's Bureau Schools of Natchitoches Parish Louisiana 1865-1868*. Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State UP, 1998, xiii.
[47] Dollar, *The Freedman's Bureau Schools of Natchitoches Parish Louisiana 1865-1868*, xiv.
[48] Picture History, The "Abraham Lincoln School" for Freedmen, http://www.picturehistory.com/product/id/11355, March 17, 2009.

Louisiana.[49] The presence of Union troops after the war helped ensure this quick progress and quell white opposition.[50]

A plethora of problems plagued the Freedman schools from the beginning. Due to the continuing problems of inadequate funding, essential educational materials such as books, slates, and chalk arrived late or not at all to the schools across the state. Abysmal teacher salaries made it difficult to retain and recruit quality teachers.[51] The Freedman Bureau's branch in Louisiana suffered a series of administrative issues, especially under Lieutenant Henderson, who continually failed to adequately collect taxes for the schools.[52] Although poverty seemed to be the Freedman schools' primary enemy, later years showed that these schools became tools for political manipulation utilized by power hungry white southerners.[53] This problem of overt issues, such as funding, and more discrete issues, like legal oversight due to the influence of well-funded reformers, reveals that the current reform effort in New Orleans is repeating a similar historical pattern.

These examples of inadequate resources, largely as a result of funding issues, caused the achievement gap in Freedman Schools. At that time, those who were interested in reforming African American schools found fault in those factors that coincided with the notion of inherent institutional racism. Because the majority of the country was racially biased, whether discrete or outright, few considered the newly freed slaves as equals. The Civil War helped end the practice of slavery, but not racism or the continued racial supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race. If the

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[49] Dollar, xv.
[50] Dollar, 6.
[51] Dollar, 24, 25.
[52] Dollar, 26.
[53] Dollar, 100.

newly freed slave couldn't get his white neighbor to refer to him as 'sir,' he would have even more difficulty acquiring an equal quality education.

The Freedman school experiment exemplified the problem of unequal distribution of resources, segregation and a climate of heated racism. An 1867 editorial in the *New Orleans Tribune* revealed the black community's opposition to separate schools. This opinion can be supported by multiple achievement gap theories, most importantly the effect of institutionalized racism upon the achievement of African Americans.[54] Despite the sad story of the Freedom schools in the south, New Orleans offers a unique case of a southern city that opted for integration over separation during Reconstruction.

New Orleans and Reconstruction: A Special Case

Unlike the majority of Louisiana, New Orleans attempted to try something different in regards to educating newly freed African Americans: integration. New Orleans did have at least one Freedman school, education reforms seem to have placed more emphasis upon fully integrating New Orleans black population into the existing school district. From 1862, due to early union occupation of the city, until 1876, a year before president Grant pulled Union troops out of the South, the public schools in New Orleans were racially integrated. Historian Donald E. Devore, who has written arguably the most comprehensive history of New Orleans' public schools, states, "such an achievement required a virtual revolution in New Orleans."[55]

In 1862, Benjamin Butler, a northerner sent by the government to help manage the city, found himself with the responsibility of running the cities public schools. He immediately began

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[54] "No Colored Schools - Public Schools for All." *The New Orleans Tribune*, July 24,1867: 1.
[55] DeVore, Donald E. *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841- 1991.* [Lafayette, La.]: Center of Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991, 40.

initiating reform, starting with the requirement that French cease to be spoken in schools and that all instruction is given in English.[56] Obviously Butler subscribed to the notion of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon language and custom, perpetuating the fundamental basis of later Eugenic ideology.

Butler passed other reforms, notably placing the administration of the school system under a single superintendent.[57] Over-centralization of the New Orleans school system caused various problems during this period, namely the efficient distribution of funding for the most massive school system in the South.[58] This Reconstruction era invention remained in practice until Katrina. Multiple stakeholders in the current experiment in New Orleans attribute the level of student success to the organization and administrations of a school system. This historical example is important to keep in mind when thinking about the problems that over-centralization caused in New Orleans before Katrina. Additionally, Butler standardized rules, textbooks, and teacher salaries through out the city. By equalizing education for all students, Butler took revolutionary action. No other school in the South, if not the rest of the nation had ever attempted allowing all children, black or white, to attend *equal* quality public schools.

Despite the achievements of the relatively large class of free blacks in New Orleans, the majority of the African American population was uneducated and lacked access academic experiences. This fact alone substantiates the social mobility factor in achievement. If the majority of the African American population had little evidence that academic achievement would offer them a better life, what would be their motivation to succeed? The small exception

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[56] DeVore, *Crescent City Schools*, 47.
[57] DeVore, 48.
[58] DeVore, 55.

provided by the class of free blacks proves Perry's theory arguing that African Americans saw education as a means to freedom and social reward.

Robert M. Lusher served as state superintendent of education from 1865 to 1868 and then reassumed the position in 1877. The state constitution in 1868 included a remarkable addition known as Article 135, in turn allowing Freedman schools and desegregation in New Orleans. The article stated that "All children of this State between the years of six and twenty-one shall be admitted to the public schools…without distinction of race, color or previous condition."[59] Although this seemed like an important step forward in the quest for the equal education effort, it had the adverse affect of initiating the phenomena known as "white flight" in which white families removed their children from integrated public schools to and moved them to private parochial schools.[60] In 1877, the Louisiana state courts initiated a reversal in desegregation efforts, thus causing a reversal of for advancements African Americans had made during Reconstruction. The *Plessey v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, establishing the "separate but equal" clause that legitimized Jim Crow and extreme racial segregation, set back the education of African Americans even further.[61]

Post-Reconstruction Educational Reforms

In 1898 Louisiana's constitution provided a more solid financial support system for Louisiana public schools. The turn of the century saw even greater increases in school enrollment, up to 204,827 children and increases in salaries, including a $1000 increase for local

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[59] Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans,* 20.
[60] Baker, 20.
[61] Baker, 36.

superintendents, indicating the need for better-qualified leadership.[62] Elected in 1904, Superintendent Aswell transformed his position as an outsider with little influence to one with direct control and authority over state educational matters.[63] Aswell's administration made significant improvements, including higher teacher salaries, expanded school enrollment, an increase in public support and revenue, improved teacher training institutions, and the beginnings of a high school system.[64] By increasing salaries for teachers and administrators, Aswell demonstrated his belief that the academic success of children depended upon the quality and efficiency of education they received. Despite these gains, quality education remained out of reach for most blacks in Louisiana until the Depression, if not until after the Civil Rights movement. However, subsequent reform, even if it did not directly benefit blacks, influences the course of the current reform effort in New Orleans.

The Great Depression, Education, and a Kingfish

Even with these advances, Louisiana still had one of the most illiterate and undereducated populations in the nation. Huey P. Long, governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932, sought to solve the social problems facing New Orleans during the Great Depression. At a time when many thousands were unemployed and could barely afford bread let alone educating their child, Long's response came in the form of redistributive politics as seen in his "Share Our Wealth" programs.[65] Looking specifically at his education reforms provides an essential historical context and comparison for this study on the current education experiment in New Orleans.

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[62] Sutton, *Louisiana's Story on Public Education*, 7.
[63] Sutton, 8.
[64] Sutton, 9.
[65] Baker, 91.

During his gubernatorial reign, Long, also referred to as the "Kingfish," established a program called "Share our Wealth." This massive wealth redistribution campaign served to fund social services, including education. At the time, Louisiana had one of the nation's worst public education systems, one in which too many poor families carried the large burden of paying for their children's education. Huey Long reformed public education so that every child in Louisiana could attend a free public school.

An examination of the problems facing the Louisiana school system prior to 1928 is essential to comprehending why Long undertook a reform effort. Public support for public education in Louisiana had long been weak. In antebellum Louisiana, elites opposed the first attempt at implementing a mandatory public education system. The wealthy planter class viewed it as a "pauper" handout, and the poor viewed it as a blessing, creating bitter class conflict.[66] Prior to 1928, Louisiana had one of the nation's lowest literacy rates, as only one in four adults could read.[67] According to the United States Office of Education, Louisiana ranked forty-forth in the nation in regards to general education and forty-seventh in regards to literacy and school attendance.[68] Instead of receiving state funding, local parishes held the responsibility for providing public education; however, a low tax base forced families to provide transportation and materials, such as textbooks, leaving the possibility of an education out of the grasp of the

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[66] Sindler, Allan P. *Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins' Press, 1956, 5-6.
[67] Huey P. Long: The Man, His Mission and Legacy,"Huey P. Long's Programs: Education." http://www.hueylong.com/programs/education.php
[68] Barnard, Bernice. "National Affairs Arouse New Student Interest. " New York Times (1857-Current file) [New York, N.Y.] 14 Apr. 1935, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2005). ProQuest. UCSB. 21 Oct. 2008 http://www.proquest.com/

poor.[69] Huey Long believed this failing system perpetuated the high poverty rate and set out to make major changes.

Huey Long's program provided free books for all children, even for those attending private school, a later addition made to quell the opposition from Catholic parents who complained that their taxes were going to educate other peoples' children and not their own.[70] The program also solved the transportation issue by providing free busing services to all children. Long built new schools, including adult vocational schools and night schools, to teach literacy skills to adults. In addition to expanding grammar and adult education, Long's educational reforms included an expansion of Louisiana's public university, lowered tuition costs and the establishment of new scholarships to help send more people to college.[71]

After the passage of Long's education bill and implementation of its programs, instant results could be seen. Historian Harnett Kane sums up Long's successes best: Long "took Louisiana out of the mud." Long's free textbook program increased school enrollment by 25 percent and that helped 100,000 of the state's 238,000 illiterate adults learn to read.[72] Despite the Great Depression, enrollment at Louisiana State University tripled by 1936.[73] However, it is important to note that these advances did not benefit everyone in Louisiana.

African Americans are largely left out of the historical literature on Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" program, and for good reason. Long was a closeted racist and worked to improve conditions for the White poor before aiding blacks. Blacks remained segregated from whites and received less funding than white schools. Any minor advancement, like the addition of black

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[69] <http://www.hueylong.com/programs/education.php>.
[70] Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana*, 54, 66.
[71] <http://www.hueylong.com/programs/education.php>.
[72] Kane, Harnett T. *Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship*, Gretna, LA: Pelican Co., 1971, 41.
[73] <http://www.hueylong.com/programs/education.php>.

vocational education in New Orleans in the late 1920s met fierce opposition from the white community.[74]

Black teachers received about 40 percent less pay, and per capita spending for the education of black children was about 20% less than spending for whites.[75] In 1930, the funding for building schools for black children came to a halt. School evaluations listed several black educational institutions as being of satisfactory quality in Louisiana in the 1930s. These rare quality institutions relied heavily on philanthropy from states in the North.[76] When funds ran short during Huey Long's reign, white schools appropriated money from black schools, which the white community viewed as more critical institutions. Black schools were in disrepair, teachers were underpaid and resources were lacking. The education blacks received during this time taught blacks to know their social place and stick to their "traditional roles."[77]

Huey Long did more to increase expenditure and access to public education than he did to racially equalize it. However, it is still important to discuss Long's reforms, as they are an example of the continued presence of racial differentiation theories utilized in education reform as well as touch upon the notion that the achievement gap in New Orleans has economic, rather than racial origins. It is clear that eugenic theory, as it pertains to the quantification of intelligence and the inferiority of African Americans, persisted in the era between reconstruction and the civil rights movement. Whites were still opposed to the equal education of African Americans, and at the time they had the law on their side. The next major phase in education

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[74] DeVore, *Crescent City Schools*, 201.
[75] Fairclough, Adam. *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*, 1915-1972. New York: University of Georgia P, 2008, 23.
[76] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 36, 38.
[77] Fairclough, 36-7.

reform did not occur until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision banning racial segregated educational facilities.

A Second Attempt at Desegregation: New Orleans Schools in the Civil Rights Era

Several historians refer to the fight to desegregate New Orleans' public schools during the Civil Rights era as the "New Orleans' School Crisis."[78] The first post-*Brown* desegregation effort in Louisiana occurred in April of 1954 when several judges ordered the admission of four African Americans to Southwest Louisiana Institute at Lafayette. The total integration of public libraries soon followed, which, because of the peripheral position to public schools, occurred without much protest. [79] It initially seemed that desegregation would be a relatively peaceful process, that is until white parents realized that it wasn't just tokenism that African Americans sought.

Although *Brown v. Board* was federal law and applied to every state, regardless of existing or future statutes, a determined Louisiana state legislature attempted to prevent it from having a tangible influence in the state. Fairclough states that the "legislature labeled *Brown* 'an unwarranted and unprecedented abuse of power'," and complained that desegregation on the basis of race was "intolerable, impractical and in the ultimate sense unenforceable."[80] Soon after *Brown* was imposed on Louisiana, the state legislature passed three laws which virtually prevented its implementation, including stripping state support from desegregated schools, giving local school boards the ability to allocate individual students to schools of their choosing,

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[78] Lief, Dr. Harold I et al., *The New Orleans School Crisis. United States of American.* Subcommittee on Education. The Louisiana State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. September 12, 1961.
[79] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 165-6.
[80] Fairclough, 169.

and a final law that mandated segregated schools as a means of preserving morals and civic order.[81]

African Americans found their greatest political and judicial ally in Judge Skelly Wright who underwent a personal ideological transformation after witnessing a brutal lynching. Although he still admitted to harboring racist thoughts, he fully opposed to racial segregation.[82] On February 15, 1956, Judge Wright "became the first district judge in the Fifth Circuit to hand down a school integration decree, hoping to end the stalling efforts of the school boards and white populace by ordering desegregation to occur in all public schools "with all deliberate speed."[83]

Several massive reform efforts occurred in 1957, including ending the ban on teachers belonging to collective organizations that advocated racial integration, and the requirement that applicants to state universities and colleges provide "certificates of eligibility and good moral character" approved by their principal.[84] Despite these efforts and small advances towards desegregation, no major achievements in regards to integration had been made. By 1960, Louisiana school boards had made no effort to observe *Brown*.[85] Fed up with the slow progress of the school board, Judge Wright ordered a direct desegregation plan himself. His plan stated that at the beginning of the following academic year, first grade African Americans would be allowed to enter a school in the neighborhood of their choice. With this order, Wright became the first judge to hand down a direct "court-ordered integration plan."[86] His motivation derived

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[81] Fairclough, 169.
[82] Fairclough, 245.
[83] Fairclough, 219.
[84] Fairclough, 219.
[85] Fairclough, 234.
[86] Fairclough, 234-5.

not from desiring to see his plan stringently observed, but rather to use it as a scare tactic to motivate school boards to establish their own, more moderate desegregation plans.

Rather than obey this final warning, the school board ignored the judge's mandate and asked Governor Jimmie Davis to essentially veto the court order and block school desegregation with an "interposition."[87] The five Louisiana men who comprised the New Orleans school board asked the governor to disobey federal orders, a tactic once used in the South's attempt to secede from the union, but now constitutionally irrelevant. If all else failed, the board resolved to shut down the school system.[88] It was summer time, after all, and all parties involved had little time to make their offers.

As the first day of school drew nearer, the school board found another loophole that looked like possible disaster for Judge Wright's plan. Simultaneously, economic interests, particularly New Orleans' businesses realized the potential financial impact a total-closure of the schools could cause, a figure over $8 million at the time. Business interests, such as the Stern Family Fund, helped launch a massive "Save Our Schools" propaganda campaign. All New Orleans' citizens, black and white, prepared for the first day of the second attempt of desegregation in New Orleans' schools.[89]

Of course, that first day of school in September of 1960 did not come without a fight. Wright prevented Governor Davis from having his way, although Wright did concede to an extended deadline to integrate. The school board also retained the right to utilize the "pupil placement law." Officially adopted in October of 1960, this law put the responsibility of integration upon black parents and their children, whose admission to all-white schools would be

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[87] Lief, *The New Orleans School Crisis*, 57.
[88] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 235.
[89] Lief, 25.

based upon meeting a range of qualifications. In the end, only four young girls were able to integrate into white schools.[90]

Once again the legislature stepped in, dissolved the school board and took complete control over the Orleans Parish School Board. At this point Wright felt that he had no other choice but to use federal forces to desegregate New Orleans' schools. The four little girls were finally able to enter the white schools, through a screaming mob of protestors, only to find the classrooms virtually empty due to a white boycott.[91] Louisiana business interests shifted their position and real integration seemed an impossibility.[92] By 1962, both private and public schools in New Orleans had only achieved "token integration."[93] The school board refused to give in to any meaningful integration, although a few advances were made in 1963, including the abandonment of the pupil placement law.[94] The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did little to accelerate the integration process, or handle it with the sensitivity and care it needed to succeed.

Those who decided *Brown v. Board* based their judgment upon the notion that all are capable of reaching their full intellectual potential, but only when they are given the equal opportunity to do so. In their attempts to remove the achievement gap, or more appropriately, the opportunity gap that distinguished white from black schools, reformers had to fight long established institutionalized racism through protest, trial and legislation. Unfortunately, the continued state of New Orleans' public schools revealed that even the lofty promises of the *Brown* decision held little water against the powerful force of systemic racism within the state.

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[90] Lief, 11. Fairclough, 237-9.
[91] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 243-5, 248.
[92] Fairclough, 453.
[93] Fairclough, 261.
[94] Fairclough, 263.

The Pre-Storm State of Things: Public Education in Louisiana 1973-2005

In the 1970s, school integration in Louisiana made real advances, however with mostly devastating effects to African Americans. The upkeep of a "dual school system" proved an extremely inefficient use of resources and funding. When integration became a reality, schools reduced teachers and personnel, and, as has often been the case for African Americas, they were the first fired. Due to a lack of a solid educational foundation, many African American students found it difficult to keep pace in formerly all-white schools and found themselves labeled as disabled.[95] White students harassed black teachers and black principals found themselves with new, meaningless administrative positions or back in the classroom.[96] As the 1970s progressed, the fire in the desegregation movement slowly died after a series of devastating judicial decisions that essentially reversed previous gains, including the reinstatement of single-race elementary schools in exchange for an equal racial ratio of teachers.[97]

Re-segregation continued through the 1980s and 90s, mostly due to the continued pattern of white flight from New Orleans to suburban parishes outside of the urban center. In 1985, Everett J. Williams became the first African American superintendent elected to the post since the era of Reconstruction.[98] In 1993, whites comprised only eight percent of the total New Orleans Parish student body, clearly demonstrating that in the battle between integration and segregation, the latter eventually won out. These extreme discrepancies in racial composition of the New Orleans' public schools lasted into the new millennium and were waiting, quietly, to be exposed by the devastating Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. It is obvious that institutional

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[95] Fairclough, 435.
[96] Fairclough, 447.
[97] Fairclough, 456.
[98] Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 481.

racism and eugenic ideology continued despite the reform, or more appropriately because of the reversal effort that occurred between 1973 and 2005.

Part III – New Orleans Schools: Before and After the Storm

In a one-on-one interview, veteran educator Leslie Williams, principal at Agnes Bauduit Elementary School in New Orleans, former teacher and parent, equated Hurricane Katrina with a death. She said that when someone dies, everyone throws you his or her support. They call, they send food, anything that will help you through the grieving process. However, after a few weeks, the phone stops ringing and the help slowly trickles to an end.[99] But the grieving doesn't end. That's what happened in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina was the top news story for weeks and support flew in (albeit a little late) from all over the world. Some sent money, others volunteered their time and labor. But eventually, that attention and support began to dwindle.

Although the media continues to paint a grim picture of the Gulf Coast in the aftermath, many in the nation act as though the city of New Orleans is back up and running: that its streets are clean, its homes rebuilt, and the children are back in school. Despite the continued efforts of a dedicated few the rebuilding effort, or what I would like to refer to as the RENEWAL effort, in New Orleans, is far from over.

Who is to say when someone can stop grieving from the loss of a loved one? How can one measure when a city has been rebuilt or renewed? I am motivated by the hope that a city devastated by a natural disaster is renewed when all of its infrastructure and services not only function again, but that they perform better than in the past. Renewal also should allow the residents of the city to return to the normalcy of daily life. This is why I have undertaken my research on the current reform effort in New Orleans public schools.

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[99] "Leslie Williams." Personal interview. 28 Jan. 2009.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans school district was a massive collection of public schools and a few charter schools all under the umbrella of a strong centralized body and one superintendent. This system, with so much power at the top and an unreliable accountability system, was failing the children of New Orleans. Something had to be done, and many reformers eagerly accepted the challenge.

The Storm Before Katrina

Before Katrina, a wide variety of problems existed within New Orleans' school district, many of which were highlighted in the July 14, 2006 Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Developments. The testimonials within the report titled "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children: Improving Education After Katrina" came from teachers, parents, pastors, superintendents, school board presidents, Charter organizers and senators.[100] According to their testimony, prior to Hurricane Katrina, the state identified New Orleans Parish School District (or NOPS) as a "District in Academic Crisis" that failed to meet the district AYP standards as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).[101] Sixty-three percent of New Orleans' schools were determined "academically unacceptable," compared to eight percent of schools in the whole of Louisiana.[102] Additional problems could be seen in the extreme disparity between in black and white academic performance, where larger achievement gaps existed in New Orleans between blacks and whites in contrast to the rest of Louisiana.[103]

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[100] Et al. Hearing Before The Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development: "A
Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children: Improving Education After Katrina. New Orleans, LA: July 14, 2007, iii.
[101] Jarvis, Robin, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children," 25.
[102] Jarvis, 25.
[103] Jarvis, 26.

This concept of a black-white achievement gap drew my interest to this project. However, upon my visit to New Orleans in January of this year, key stakeholders revealed a different type of achievement gap emerging in the reform effort. Due to the fact that the New Orleans' public schools have over a 95 percent black student population, a racial achievement gap is difficult to gauge. What emerged instead was an achievement gap based on class and socioeconomic status. The better comparison to make should not be racially based, as the public school system is almost entirely black, but rather class-based, comparing the students at public schools to the over forty percent of New Orleans' children who attend private or parochial schools.[104]

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' had the highest illiteracy rate in the nation. Only one in four had completed high school, and forty percent of adults could not read past a fifth-grade level.[105] The New Orleans Parish School (NOPS) district also had the seventh highest dropout rate in the nation, despite a better than average student to teacher ratio.[106] A major reason for the high dropout rate was the systemic low achievement on the GEE, or Graduate Exit Exam passage of which is required by George W. Bush's 'No Child Left Behind Act'. Overall, only 30-35 percent of New Orleans schools had achieved what the GEE deems as basic proficiency in English and math. Where only five percent of high school seniors throughout Louisiana had to repeat the twelfth grade, over fifteen percent of New Orleans' seniors did so.[107]

The schools' facilities were not in pristine shape even before Katrina's 100-mile-per-hour winds blew away doors, windows and walls. School administrators estimated that prior to the storm, $52 million would be needed for repairs to bring the buildings up to code. The schools

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[104] "Michael Schwam-Baird." Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2009.
[105] Jarvis, 28.
[106] Jarvis, 25.
[107] Jarvis, 28.

were also severely underinsured, complicating efforts to secure relief funding after the storm from FEMA[108]

New Orleans has long suffered from a great deal of systemic and social inequality. According to the 2000 U.S. census records and Parish district composite reports, 40 percent of the children attending the New Orleans Parish School District schools lived below the poverty line. Over 90 percent of the children attending NOPS schools were of African American descent, 74 percent of the students received a free or reduced-cost lunch program.[109]

The New Orleans' Parish Schools also faced financial problems. Thanks to a tremendous "legacy" debt of $256 million and a dramatic decrease in revenue funding, the district almost bankrupted itself even before the storm hit.[110] Michael Schwam-Barid, research director for the Scott Cowen Institute, a non-profit research organization monitoring the progress of the reform effort, reported that the Orleans Parish School Board had in fact gone bankrupt. It was not even aware of the bankruptcy until it was too late, a clear example of the managerial incompetence plaguing the system.[111] Internal investigations, indictments, and a federal audit questioned the use and distribution of $71 million in Title I funding, allocated to school boards by the federal government as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in order to counteract obstacles facing disadvantaged children.[112]

Over half of the paychecks distributed in any given pay period were incorrect. In December of 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued eleven indictments for crimes relating to fraudulent economic management. The school system had been underestimating budgets,

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[108] Jarvis, 29.
[109] Jarvis, 28.
[110] Jarvis, 28.
[111] "Michael Schwam-Baird." Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2009.
[112] Jarvis, 25.

overspending, losing its sources of revenue and giving incomplete benefit coverage to its employees.[113] Due to the board's complete inability to distribute funds properly, the Louisiana state legislature handed financial management of the school board to the private financial firm of Alvarez & Marsal, which after a close analysis of NOPS books revealed almost $30 million in "liabilities payable."[114]

Michael Schwam-Baird blamed the financial mismanagement of the OPSB for the massive firing of teachers right after the storm. While many, especially the teachers of New Orleans believed that they were fired because of the state take-over in 2005, the school board had actually exhausted all of its cash reserves and the state could not afford to continue paying the teachers. The school board conveniently blamed the state to avoid further embarrassment and negative exposure in the press.[115]

Organizational issues plagued the school system prior to the storms as well. Former educator and longtime resident of New Orleans, Meg Moring, who worked in New Orleans public schools during the 2004-2005 school year, simply said, "the district was…troubled."[116] When asked why, she cited corruption and leadership as the main culprits. Leslie Williams echoed her sentiment when she declared that a lack of strong leadership was causing major problems in the district.[117] Constant staff turnovers, especially at the top level made it increasingly difficult to maintain stability within the system. In addition to losing the employees who received federal indictments, the NOPS system had ten superintendents over a ten-year period.[118]

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[113] Jarvis, 28.
[114] Jarvis, 29.
[115] "Michael Schwam-Baird." Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2009.
[116] "Meg Moring." Personal interview. 27 Jan. 2009.
[117] "Leslie Williams." Personal interview. 28 Jan. 2009.
[118] Jarvis, 28.

The storm exposed the magnitude of the problems of bringing back displaced children to a failing school system. The actual storm displaced 72,000 NOPS students across 48 states, 65,000 of those children were still in Louisiana, swelling up public schools within and outside the state. [119] The passage of HERA, the Hurricane Recovery Act, allotted funds through Aid for Displaced Students. Assistance for Homeless Youth helped locate displaced children and bring them back to New Orleans, as well as provide them with food and shelter.[120]

Once the floodwaters subsided, school officials and volunteers began the rebuilding process by "repairing schools, re-staffing schools, replacing furniture, the equipment, the textbooks, and other curriculum materials, as well as planning and developing curriculum and professional development for the teachers and principals we are hiring."[121] While this initial work was taking place, a powerful private and charter school lobby sought federal support for a monumental experiment.[122] These self-proclaimed education reformers saw a devastated New Orleans as a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to completely transform an entire city's school system, starting virtually from scratch.[123]

Although it is important to discuss the problems of the school system in New Orleans pre-Katrina, my research in New Orleans revealed that a cross-comparison of the new system and the old provides insufficient evidence to explain the success of the reform effort. Due to the extraordinarily different composition of the new system, a more appropriate comparison would

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[119] Wallin, Carole, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children," 20.
[120] Wallin, 21-22.
[121] Jarvis, 23.
[122] Quigley, Bill. "Fighting for the Right to Learn: The Public Education Experiment Two Years After Katrina." *The Black Agenda Report,* August 8 2007.
[123] Issacson, Walter. "The Greatest Education Lab. How Katrina Opened the Way For an Influx of
School Reformers." *Time Magazine*, September 18, 2007, 3.

evaluate the new system on its own terms, comparing progress from one year to the next.[124] That doesn't discount the problems prior to Katrina. Rather they should be remembered to improve future policymaking.

Katrina's Devastation

I visited New Orleans in March of 2008 to volunteer with an organization called Relief Spark, which provided volunteers the unique opportunity to help in a variety of ways, including demolition, aiding at an animal shelter, a children's museum and doing yard work for local citizens trying to reestablish a life in post-Katrina New Orleans. I stayed in a mansion on the famous St. Charles street, but slept on a cot, as the director of the program rented out the large space to house as many volunteers as possible.

To feed the many hungry volunteers, the director also hired a chef, Oma. Oma was like the southern grandmother I never had. Not only did she introduce me to the amazing world of Cajun cuisine, but she was also my first encounter with a real-life hurricane survivor. With tears in her eyes even three years later, Oma recalled how all she was able to get out of her house was her dog, the clothes on her back, $85 and a Ray Charles CD. Oma lost all of her other possessions and her home and was only repaid about $4,000 by the government to start her life over again. Fortunately her children are grown and therefore unaffected by the total destruction of the New Orleans school system. Others were not as lucky.

Although some of the NOPS buildings were salvaged, many were completely destroyed in the storm. I recall touring through the Lower 9th ward, one of the most damaged parishes in

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[124] The Scott S. Cowen Institute et al., *The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2008 Report.* New Orleans: Tulane University, 2008. Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*,

New Orleans, and seeing an abandoned school. The roof had caved in, mold had overtaken the walls, and broken, rotten desks and lockers littered the schoolyard. To think that this building once helped provide education and stability to young minds was hard to fathom in the presence of the debris.

When I asked former educator and hurricane evacuee, Meg Moring, what FEMA had done right, she said that "they did a pretty good job on the 'blue-roofs."[125] These were temporary tarps secured on the roofs of buildings to prevent water from leaking in and causing damage. A temporary solution to a problem that needs a permanent one, a pattern that FEMA tends to follow in its recovery efforts in New Orleans.

The director at the community center in St. Bernard's Parish, R.M. "Iray" Nabatoff, told me that each FEMA trailer ended up costing a total of $750,000 each, money that could have been split by several families to permanently rebuild their homes. Yet again, FEMA responded with a temporary solution. After living in the trailers for several years, many adults and children began to suffer form chronic health problems, later attributed to high levels of formaldehyde within the mobile units.[126] Not only was FEMA's solution to housing evacuees a temporary solution, it also caused more problems than it solved.

Every state in the nation, except for Hawaii, assimilated at least one student displaced by Katrina in their public school systems. Houston, Texas absorbed the largest number of evacuated Katrina victims and their children totaling over 200,000.[127] Leslie Williams and her son went to Mississippi and were lucky to have relatives to stay with, a luxury compared to some of the living arrangements others were forced to endure, including homelessness. Williams

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[125] "Meg Moring." Personal interview. 27 Jan. 2009.
[126] Thompson, Jonathan F. "Letter: FEMA Trailers." *New York Times*, April 4, 2008.
[127] Blumenthal, Ralph. "A Rescue Mission Under Control: Houston Adjusts Well on the Fly." *New York Times,* September 14, 2005.

stated that the transition was difficult for her son, but not as difficult as it must have been for thousands of other families who did not have a "pretense of normal," as Williams described the home life that she and her son had.[128]

[128] "Leslie Williams." Personal interview. 28 Jan. 2009.

Part IV: NOLA Now! The Current Reform Effort

New Orleans schools were clearly troubled prior to Katrina and it unfortunately took a category-four hurricane to expose the problems. However, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, education reformers in New Orleans are trying to perform a similar feat: create a model school system for failing urban school systems around the nation upon a completely blank slate. The plan was first outlined in theory, and now after three complete school years, the actual composition of the school system can be articulated.

The reformers instituted a model that moved away from an overly centralized model towards one based upon choice and fragmentation of the school system. The fragmentation of the school system reflects the fragmentation of perspectives regarding the reform effort. Among the key stakeholders involved in the reform effort, varied opinions exist regarding the pressing problems of the pre-storm system, what the key factors are in raising student achievement, as well as whether or not the experiment has been a success. Detailed accounts of each perspective, as well as analysis of possible biases and achievement gap theories employed by each stakeholder group, informed my own personal assessment of the reform effort and allowed me to draw conclusions on the larger lessons to be taken from New Orleans, especially in regards to what this means for urban education across the nation.

A Model For The Nation

Exactly what to call the current reform effort in New Orleans is itself cause for debate. When I phoned the Recovery School District (RSD) and spoke with Siona LaFrance, director of communications and media for the RSD, she was very stern with me when I referred to it as an "experiment." She replied, "We do not call it an 'experiment'." I apologized, but was too timid

at the time to ask what she would rather me refer to it as. She didn't seem to mind when I referred to it as a "reform effort" so I left it at that. However, when it comes down to it, the proposed plan, in the technical sense, is an experiment. There is a control group (the traditional public schools) and the variable or experimental group (the charter schools) and they are being compared to see which is more successful in raising student achievement. The effort will continue for five years, until 2010, and then a final determination will be made on its relative success.

Developed by Scott Cowen, the "Bring Back New Orleans" Plan outlined the new design of New Orleans public schools. The experiment implemented a series of charter school networks, utilizing a shared service provider (for example, food and janitorial services), run by "local universities, authorizers, and businesspersons."[129] These providers managed the school-related services such as food production, waste management and accounting, so that principals and school administrators could focus on education, rather than bureaucratic responsibilities.[130] This was the goal in theory, however the most recent Cowen Institute report published on public schools in New Orleans paints a slightly different picture. Rather than all of the charters sharing a service provider, different groups, both public, like the Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District, and private, such as Algiers Charter Association, used different service providers, making these services somewhat costly and inefficient.[131]

The plan has been implemented and will be closely monitored for five years, at which time a thorough evaluation of the programs' successes and /or failures will be conducted. This

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[129] Senator Landrieu, Hon. Mary L. Hearing Before The Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development: "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children: Improving Education After Katrina." New Orleans, LA: July 14, 2007, 5.
[130] Landrieu, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children: Improving Education After Katrina." 5.
[131] Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, 4.

experiment, if successful, will help provide proof that charter schools outperform traditional public schools and therefore should replace them in New Orleans, and ideally, across the country. According to Republican Senator Alexander, "A charter school is simply a public school that frees parents and teachers from rules and regulations and empowers them to make the best possible decisions about educating children whose parents choose for them to go to that school."[132] The charter school movement acquired tremendous momentum during the 1990s. They emerged within a context of a debate between those interested in "privatizing" education and those who sought "tighter government control over public schools."[133] Those in favor of charter schools see the vital link between community and schools dissolving with the increased move towards standardization, possibly best exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act.[134] Those who support charters do so because they view governance as directly linked to student achievement, as well as believe in the need for diversified educational experiences. One can infer that the theory of cultural competence would support the notion that charters are designed with its particular community and demographics in mind, and shape instruction accordingly.

An article published by the *Black Agenda Report*, an online African American news source, described the "experiment" as a two-tiered system of public RSD schools run by the state and semi-private charters.[135] Looking at the reform effort in this narrow spectrum would obviously bring about a negative response as it makes the school system appear as a dual-education model like that employed in segregated New Orleans prior to *Brown v. Board*. However the most recent report by the Cowen Institute provided more specific details, allowing

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[132] Cowen Institute, 2.
[133] Brouillette, Liane. *Charter Schools: Lessons in Reform*, LEA Publishers, New Jersey: 2002, xi.
[134] Brouillette, *Charter Schools*, 2.
[135] Quigley, *The Black Agenda Report*, 1.

for more interpretations of the successes and failures of the system design thus far. Even the congressional hearing failed to accurately describe the design of the new system, because it did not take into account the many different branches of the public school network now established in New Orleans. Inaccurately describing the nature of the reform effort can leave too much room for ignorance, bad planning and misinterpretation.

The 2008 report by the Scott S. Cowen Institute provided the most comprehensive overview of the experiment in practice, its problems and successes, as well as recommendations for policy makers thus far. The report went into great detail describing how the new system of schools was organized. Currently fifty-nine schools are under the jurisdiction of the RSD school district, led by superintendent Paul Vallas. Thirty-three of these schools are traditional publics, educating 12,300 students. Twenty-six of the RSD-run schools are charters with lottery-system admissions, defined by the parents' guide as "a process of randomly selecting students from a pool of applicants."[136] BESE or Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, a state-run board, oversees two charters schools educating 800 students. Orleans Parish School Board, the original New Orleans school district prior to Katrina, still exists despite its financial problems pre-Katrina, although now they only oversee nineteen schools, seven of which are traditional publics and twelve of which are charters, educating a total of 9,800 students.

Within these governing bodies, several charter schools are run by independent organizations such as the Algiers Charter Association which runs nine New Orleans' charter schools and the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) which oversees three schools as well

[136] Ed. Aesha Rasheed, (New Schools for New Orleans), *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools*. Guide Book. New Orleans: 2008.

various other groups overseeing one or two schools. Some of these organizations have formed alliances to share service-costs, but many are still independent of one another.[137]

A More Personal Approach to Assessment: Key Stakeholders and Their Views on the Reform Effort

The work of Brian Beabout, a dedicated educator and researcher of the reform effort, provides an excellent starting point for evaluating the motivations behind the experiment, as well to documenting the successes and failures. There are five major "stakeholders" within the experiment: The United Teachers of New Orleans; the Orleans Parish School Board; the State of Louisiana; Algiers Charter School Association; and Mayor Ray Nagin's "Bring New Orleans Back" Education Subcommittee.

Beabout assessed each group as follows: the teachers wished to return to the status quo and not see any major change occur in New Orleans' education. The School Board refused to take any further responsibility for fear of the consequences of future implications of corruption or mismanagement. The Algiers Charter School Association wanted to promote its program in New Orleans and receive the federal grant money offered by President Bush. The state of Louisiana wanted to avoid any future embarrassment of a corrupt and failing school system and the BNOB Education Subcommittee wanted to take time to thoroughly research and design the most relevant and effective school system for a recovering New Orleans.[138]

Beabout's framework provided a good starting point from which I could do further investigation. While conducting my research I discovered several other prominent stakeholders

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[137] Cowen Institute, *12*-13.
[138] Beabout, B, "Stakeholder Organizations: Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Public Schools," *Multicultural Education* v. 15 no. 2 (Winter 2007), p. 43-9.

who Beabout didn't include in his 2007 article. These include parents and students, the two groups with arguably the most invested in the outcome of this effort. Below I will go into further detail on the motivations, goals, and perspectives of each of the stakeholders in the effort.

Bring New Orleans Back Education Subcommittee

The most prominent group in the Bring New Orleans Back Education Subcommittee is the Scott S. Cowen Institute. Scott Cowen, president of Tulane University, has been a leading force in designing and researching the current reform effort. Based on the publications disseminated by the institute as well as my own experiences with prominent members in the organization, it is clear that the Cowen Institute has played the least self-serving role as they are not profiting in any way from the reform effort.

The Cowen Institute seeks to bring quality education to everyone in New Orleans and to present organizations and policy makers with a comprehensive look at the reform effort. Their most recent report, published in 2008, provided the most detailed description of the problems that still exist and the types of solutions can be applied as and evaluated the relative success of the program so far. The report drew upon information gathered from over one hundred interviews, eleven focus groups and 1,897 surveys filled out by parents, policy makers, principals, students, teachers and neighborhood associations.[139] Although Michael Schwam-Baird noted that the data collected does not entirely reveal the current state of education in New Orleans due to poor census collection and differentials in accessibility across the city, the institute carefully selected what information to include to get as accurate an account as

[139] Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, 6-7.

possible.[140] As many residents in New Orleans still have not returned to the city or do not have access to the internet or the researchers themselves, the surveys were conducted at locations that most people did have access to: supermarkets.[141]

The report outlined what the Cowen Institute deemed as the major problems prior to the storm and during the first year of the reform effort. Prior to Katrina, the lack of a stable governing body, with a high superintendent turnover rate limited the effectiveness of the school system. The report also cited money mismanagement and decaying school facilities as major issues prior to Katrina.

Since the report assessed the first years of the reform effort, it paid special attention to the issues currently plaguing the new school system. It cited teacher training and support as a critical issue. Sixty percent of the teachers in the RSD-run schools, both charter and traditional, "have less than two years of teaching experience." In addition, they teach in challenging environments with children who often perform below grade level and suffer from disciplinary issues or unidentified learning disabilities. Such problems plague other schools in the new system, but to a lesser degree. The Cowen Institute validated achievement gap theories that see teacher training and competency as significant factors in boosting academic achievement, especially in high-risk schools.

Funding and spending remain a critical problem in the new school system. Currently the schools work with a budget that includes one-time or temporary funding for relief and disaster recovery that will soon end. When this happens, schools will have to reevaluate their budgets

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[140] "Michael Schwam-Baird." Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2009.
[141] "Michael Schwam-Baird."

and possibly drop programs and certain "initiatives" such as "low student-teacher rations, new technology, and extended day and summer school programs."[142]

Special education and mental health services unfortunately do not serve the needs of the city. Many students with disabilities have not been evaluated; the full inclusion plan of incorporating them into regular classes is difficult for new teachers as they must teach children of 'normal' abilities while addressing the special needs of others in the class. The city also lacks sufficient numbers of qualified mental health professionals to help the many children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy's theory on the need for more relevant and involved school counseling as well as the different theories that relate to teaching children of disaster are clearly relevant to the New Orleans case.

The education of children who have experience trauma as a result of a natural disaster needs special consideration. Others have highlighted this issue facing the children of New Orleans schools as a pressing concern. Educator Leslie Williams spoke about how children's psychological needs often go unfulfilled at home. Bauduit Elementary offers counseling to address the issues that boys and girls may not have the ability to discuss at home. "Even basic issues like hygiene need to be addressed," says Williams who stated that her family dinners with her son are not the norm with her student body. Williams also discussed a story of several students who were living in a car with their parent. In the case of a student who had major disciplinary issues, the Bauduit staff recognized that sympathy and understanding rather than harsh punishment were the solution. Former educator Meg Moring remembered students wearing "R.I.P." t-shirts for a friend that had drowned in the storm. She added how hard it is to

[142] Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, 35.

loose loved ones to storms, something that no one had any control over, leaving those left behind with an even greater sense of instability.

Journalist Shaila Dewan chronicled the lives of young Katrina victims who are still finding it difficult to adjust and recover from the trauma they experienced. Some children have stopped attending school all together. Highlighted in the article is Jermaine Howard, a 16-year-old who was moved through the system despite flunking the seventh grade. In fact he was allowed to skip eighth grade and start attending high school, obviously ill prepared. He began to skip class on a regular basis and now has stopped going completely, replacing his pens and books with a Dairy Queen uniform. Jermaine's father even encouraged the choice as he thought it pointless for his son to continue attending school if he was not going to receive any credit.

The article places some of the blame upon the parents for making choices that work against what "the experts" have deemed as the most important step towards recovery: stability. With the closure of the "Renaissance Village" FEMA trailer park, many New Orleans parents have no choice but instability.[143] However, the article asserts that the lack of adequate and affordable housing has lefts many parents with few options and little government support. Many experts believe that getting a child in a school and keeping them there will help provide the sense of stability that is missing from home.[144]

Additionally, the move from centralization towards fragmentation of the school system has created problems. The Cowen report says that "Cooperation among schools and districts" presented a challenge to the new school system. The report cites "tension" between schools and their districts and even between each other, usually a result of conflict "over access to resources,

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[143] Dewan, Shaila. " Holdouts Test Aid's Limitations as FEMA Shuts a Trailer Park." *New York Times,* June 7, 2008.
[144] Dewan, Shaila. "Many Children Lack Stability Long After Storm." *New York Times.* December 4, 2008.

student recruitment, buildings and service provision."[145] The decentralization model gave more control to the schools themselves over management, however inconsistencies among schools may indicate that centralization, as implemented in earlier reform efforts in Louisiana, had some strengths.

As a last major issue, the Cowen report discusses the "lack of timely and accessible school information for parents, students, and the public." Since there is no uniform tracking system, it has been difficult to track how students and their parents are taking advantage of choice within the school system.[146] Holcomb-McCoy stressed the importance of the data collection role for school counselors to help keep the school up to date on the circumstances and living situations of the students.

The Cowen Institute also acknowledged many achievements of the new system. New leadership, especially the arrival of Paul Vallas as superintendent, has helped the school system move away from its past reputation of being run by corrupt leadership. School buildings in horrible need of basic functions, such as working kitchens and bathrooms, have now been brought up to date. Schools also report better access to supplies. The school system addressed the teacher shortage that existed during the first school year after the storm and many new teachers have been hired, allowing class sizes to remain small. The rate of community involvement is steadily increasing, especially with charter schools. The report concludes that in general, those intimately involved in the reform effort see continual progress being made with the new system.[147]

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[145] Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, 4.
[146] Cowen Institute, 64.
[147] Cowen Institute, 4.

Teachers

The teachers of New Orleans expressed their perspective on the state takeover as well as on the reform effort itself in the 2007 report by the collective teachers' organizations. After the storms and the massive teacher firings, a well-organized and well-funded charter school lobby in Washington and in Louisiana convinced the governor and Louisiana state legislature to turn the devastated school district into an educational laboratory in which the worst pre-Katrina public schools would be converted into charter schools. Conventionally, charter schools have been created through a collaboration of parents, teachers, school administrators, school board officials and the state. This did not occur in 2005. Rather, critical players were left out of the rebuilding efforts. Teachers and parents were still not even back in their homes and certain areas of New Orleans were still under water when the first schools were converted to charter status. This was accomplished because the state overrode certain laws to allow business interests and educational non-profits to write charter plans without the help of parents, teachers and school administrators.

When students began to filter back into New Orleans for the 2005-2006 school year they returned to a dual-system of charters and RSD publics. Under the new system, charter schools were allowed to cap enrollment, practice selective admissions and prevent teachers from belonging to a union. The RSD publics were essentially the "last-resort" schools that lacked qualified teachers and space for the droves of children excluded from the charters, including disproportionate numbers of special needs children. According to *No Experience Necessary,* even though pay in the RSD schools was better than in other Louisiana parishes, a poor working environment made it difficult to attract a qualified teachers. Many of the fired veteran teaching staff returned to New Orleans after the storm, but were discouraged from returning to the district. The teachers who decided not to teach in New Orleans again noted the profound lack of respect

from the state, including the firings and the ban on collective organization and protection from arbitrary termination-policies that did not exist in other parishes.

The teachers of New Orleans and the Algiers Charter Association viewed the issue of teachers' accountability in very different ways. Whereas the teachers believed they should enjoy job security after a certain number of years in service, Algiers subscribed to a rewards-based model, holding teachers directly responsible for student achievement. This approach to student achievement has the potential for disaster in that some teachers will opt to teach to the test and will lack personal motivation to increase student achievement outside of the test. The teachers saw their firing as the main problem with the state takeover and paid little attention to the fundamental problems of student achievement as no mention of such problems are found in their report.

The teachers also criticized of the new teacher training and assessment policy put forth in the 2005 Louisiana Plan for Qualified Teachers. The teachers argued that despite the plan's good intentions, the charters hired new teachers instead of veterans and failed to promote teacher retention programs. Such policies contributed to high turnover rates. Poor and minority students in the RSD publics learned in overcrowded classrooms and received instruction from inexperienced and overwhelmed teachers who quit at high rates. The experience of New Orleans affirmed the validity of the achievement gap theory that credited experienced and culturally competent teachers as key factors in boosting academic achievement.[148]

Charter School Associations

[148] United Teachers of New Orleans, Louisiana Federation of Teachers and American Federation of Teachers. *No Experience Necessary: How the New Orleans School Takeover Experiment Devalues Experienced Teachers.* June 2007. www.aft.org/presscenter/releases/downloads/NoExperReport_07.pdf

A variety of charter school organizations currently oversee schools in New Orleans. Charter schools are still public, but they have greater freedom to set enrollment caps and admissions requirements. The most prominent is the Algiers Charter School Association. Their mission "to prepare every school and every teacher to teach every child, so that all will learn" reflects the belief that all children are capable of reaching their full academic potential with the right resources. Currently Algiers oversees nine schools, more than any other independent charter organizations in New Orleans.[149] They supported a decentralized school system on the grounds that schools function better when freed of "the burdens of conventional education structures."[150] Algiers recently instituted performance-based rewards due to the significant rise in test scores at Algiers charters schools.[151] Rewarding teachers based on their students' performance, held teachers directly accountable for their student's academic success, but it also raised other concerns. Will teachers of traditional publics continue to flock to charters for this type of pay system, further leaving the RSD with fewer quality teachers? Only time will tell.

The Algiers Charter Association views the current experiment as a success. Their website includes a link to a February 2009 Times-Picayune article, which praised the reform effort for raising test scores over 15 percent higher than those of pre-Katrina schools.[152] Nowhere in their published material did Algiers cite any major problems affecting their schools, so it is critical to take Algiers perspective of the reform effort with a grain of salt. No new

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[149] Algiers Charter School Association, "Our Schools," http://www.algierscharterschools.org/schools.htm.
[150] Algiers Charter School Association, "Mission Statement," About Us, http://www.algierscharterschools.org/about_us.htm.
[151] Hurwitz, Jenny, "Teachers Get Nice Green Star for Boosting Students' Scores," *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans: February 3, 2009.
[152] Editorial, "Evidence in Favor of Reform," *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans: February 3, 2009.

system can ever be flawless in its earliest years, and Algiers lack of public discloser of present problems makes their assessment thus far incomplete.

The State of Louisiana

Louisiana was not the first state to come in and take over failing public schools. California had intervened in 1993 and allowed a state takeover of Compton public schools, as they performed well below state standards.[153] Louisiana took over the school system because it no longer wanted to be embarrassed by having one of the worst school systems in the country. In her opening statement in the 2007 congressional hearing before the Subcommittee of Education and Early Childhood Development, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu remarked that the state shared responsibility for the failed schools that existed prior to Katrina and that the state felt compelled to prevent failure from occurring again.[154] Like many others, Senator Landrieu saw the clean slate left by the hurricanes as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to avoid "slipping back into the old patterns of destructive behavior."[155] Senator Landrieu supported the Scott Cowen plan for reforming education in New Orleans, and praised the plan's greater transparency.[156]

Senator Landrieu's address to Congress mentioned the need for the speedy implementation of the new plan as reason to bypass certain normal bureaucratic procedures for approving new charter schools. Bill Quigley's report on the school takeover in New Orleans criticized the state's intentional oversight of laws regarding charter schools' creation because

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[153] Matthews, Joe. "State to End Takeover of Compton Schools," Los Angeles Times, September 18, 2000.
[154] Landrieu, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children," 4.
[155] Landrieu, 5.
[156] Landrieu, 6.

teachers, parents and other invested parties at that time evacuated to other states could not participate.[157] The state also stressed the importance of teacher preparation after the storm. The *Louisiana Plan for Qualified Teachers* called for the return of veteran teachers and an active program to promote new teacher development to meet standards put forth by George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* act. The most important strategy was "a state equity plan for HQT (subject credential standards) for ensuring that inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other children do not teach poor and minority children."[158]

Parents and Students

Students also participated in the process of reforming New Orleans schools. At the same congressional hearing in 2007, a letter from a twelve-year-old student was read into the record. This student, Gordon Alexander Cole, established a student organization titled H.E.L.P (Helping Educate Louisiana Pupils), which called for the expansion and improvement of Louisiana's public school libraries.[159] Students in New Orleans also compiled a comprehensive account of common student complaints about the previous system and student recommendations for improvement. The students were particularly interested in improving bathrooms and cafeterias. The students also suggested how to make the new schools more environmentally sustainable, indicating that they believed improved and progressive facilities motivated students to achieve at higher levels.[160]

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[157] Quigley, *The Black Agenda Report.*
[158] "Louisiana Plan for Highly Qualified Teachers," July 2006. http://ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/hqtplans/la.doc
[159] Cole, Alexander, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children," 7.
[160] Cohen, Ed, ed. "Student Comments and Recommendations," *School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish.* New Orleans Public Schools: Louisiana, August 2008.

Students have also become active in shaping the reform effort through an organization known as the Fyre Youth Squad or FYS. The student organization is composed of committed 14 to 24 year olds and meets biweekly to " create solutions for the many problems facing New Orleans Public School students, advocates for accountability of our elected officials and policy makers, and promotes awareness and activism amongst the children and youth of New Orleans."[161] This organization evolved out of forums held by a New Orleans neighborhood organization to give students an opportunity to vocalize their concerns with the new system. Appalled with the early condition of the RSD schools, Frye's forums allow students to share their thoughts on the major issues facing New Orleans public schools as well as highlight possible solutions.

The hearing also included a statement of a deeply involved parent, Sarah Ottinger, who contributed to the plan for a new charter school in New Orleans, Audubon. This proved to be a rare occurrence, as most of the plans were written by Charter organizations without parent or community input.[162] Ottinger commented that the charter plan was designed to preserve the unique curriculum the school previously employed and that since Katrina, "governing decisions are made by a board that whole-heartedly supports out culture and curricula, and makes its decisions in an even-handed, fair manner."[163] Ottinger attributed rising student achievement since the Hurricane to Audubon's charter status, parent involvement and increased access to resources. Ottinger subscribed to the achievement gap theory that stressed access to resources, including parents, as key factors in raising student achievement. However, Ottinger's

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[161] Frye Youth New Orleans, Louisiana, "About Us," Myspace, www.myspace.com/1fyreyouth, (accessed March 16, 2009).
[162] Cohen, Ed. "Student Comments and Recommendations," 12. Quigley, *The Black Agenda Report.*
[163] Ottinger, Sarah, "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children," 16.

perspective did not reflect the perspective of parents whose children attended traditional publics in New Orleans. The Scott Cowen report interviewed and surveyed parents, including those whose children attended traditional publics and found that 82 percent of parents felt that their child's school encouraged parent involvement, however "parental involvement is only slightly improved since the hurricane." Parents lacked the desire to become involved because they felt the school system had failed them when they attended.[164]

Obviously no consensus exists regarding the state of New Orleans education post-Katrina. Evaluating each perspective within the context of pre-Katrina problems and the history of education reform in Louisiana, while applying related achievement gap theories allows for several conclusions and recommendations to be made. Hopefully these can be applied to the current system to avoid the continuation and growth of the present problems facing New Orleans' public schools.

[164] Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, 640-1.

Conclusions

The New Orleans reform effort is not scheduled to be completely evaluated until 2010, at which point its fate will be decided. To draw definitive conclusions from the midpoint assessment I conducted can be difficult, if not impossible. Rather, my findings have enabled me only to suggest areas of improvement, as well as note further areas of inquiry that, when acted upon, might continue to move this reform effort in a positive direction.

The achievement gap in New Orleans is being addressed in several ways under the current public school system. The system underwent a drastic transformation from an over-centralized district to a fragmented network of schools. Charter schools are rewarding teachers for students showing improved test scores, thus holding teachers directly accountable for success. The state has enacted new legislation to assess teacher quality. However, addressing only some factors of low student achievement is not enough, something that the history of Louisiana school reform has shown consistently. It seems that achievement gap theorists are quite fond of throwing all of their eggs in one basket: they try to come up with a single solution to a complex problem (stereotype threat, cultural competency, teacher quality, counseling, etc). I contend that school reform should address as many factors related to student achievement as possible.

While the reform effort has instituted several different educational systems to end the achievement gap, the reform effort has not done enough to address the special issue of teaching children of disaster. Funding and resources need to be allocated properly to public schools so that children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder can be diagnosed and treated. Additionally, allowing parents to choose their child's school is a great idea, but only when parents have the wherewithal to make an informed choice. More parent education in regards to

choosing the right school for their child is key to having this reform effort succeed. As the teachers of New Orleans are understandably upset over the loss of their right to collective bargaining, something needs to be done to show that these veteran teachers are respected and viewed as an asset to New Orleans public education. Algiers charters has attempted to reward teachers, but will that be enough to retain veteran teachers? A framework that allows teachers to negotiate, while also keeping them accountable, is necessary to bring quality teachers back into New Orleans' classrooms.

It appears that the move from centralization to fragmentation may be creating just as much inefficiency as before the storm. Better communication and standardization between the schools should be implemented to avoid waste and "student dumping:" that is denying acceptance of children (especially those with special needs) at charters and overcrowding the traditional publics. Finally, I believe that all schools in New Orleans should be made charters to level the educational playing field.

Several other important questions arise when thinking about the current reform effort in New Orleans. Addressing the problems that still exist in post-Katrina schools within the context of the following larger issues will allow the reform to reach its full potential for success.

What does this experiment mean for urban education around the country? It is difficult to say that charter schools will work for every urban school system. New Orleans is a unique city that is racially diverse, but the public schools are between 95-100% African American and from primarily low-income homes. A large private and parochial school system changes the nature of the achievement gap debate from a racially based gap to a socioeconomically based gap. Although it is critical that urban education reform needs to occur, it should be *informed* reform in

that it takes into account *all* relevant theory and uses lessons from its community's particular history.

How should Louisiana rethink testing and assessment? The success of this reform effort is being measured by Louisiana's standardized test. The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) does not have a separate format for children with special needs. If this practice continues, these exceptional children will continue to show low scores and will face difficulty obtaining admissions to the best public schools. Additionally, standardized testing does not take into account the value of authentic assessment (based upon the totality of student ability, rather than just standardized test performance), a tool theorist Holcomb-McCoy believed would instantaneously shrink the achievement gap.

Is Teach for America part of the problem? I used to want to be a member, however after doing this research, the issue regarding the *critical* importance of veteran and quality teachers in at-risk schools cannot be over looked. Over 30 percent of the teachers in post-Katrina New Orleans schools are Teach for America recruits. Most of these recruits come from middle-class backgrounds and have little cultural competence or understanding of urban life and culture. We need more experienced teachers, not more inexperienced, overwhelmed, and temporary teachers who will leave in two years for a different career.

There is hope. Despite continued problems, there has been improvement, and in only three full school years. Many involved in the project are pleased with the progress being made and feel that New Orleans public schools are moving in a positive direction.

One critical question remains…what is the point? Even if the public education system in New Orleans transforms into one of the nation's best, another storm like Katrina will un-due all of the hard work. The levees that failed to prevent flooding in 2005 have been rebuilt to the

same specifications. The government needs to build up the levees to prevent this destruction from happening again. Otherwise, it will be back to square one.

Everyone deserves the right to an equal and outstanding education, and New Orleans is no exception.

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