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Katrina's Last Victims?

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One of the least remarked-upon aspects of the Katrina catastrophe has been its impact on the education of children in the Gulf Coast. As researchers who study urban education, we see both opportunities in New Orleans and the potential for a long-running disaster.

Before Katrina the New Orleans system was widely considered one of the nation's most dysfunctional, although it had begun to make progress in the year before the storm, judging by scores on state accountability assessments. It was always a system that worked for some children. As we heard a community activist point out, it worked for those few white students who stayed in it. Indeed, while black students in New Orleans ranked at the very bottom in state scores, white students' scores were the highest in Louisiana.

In the aftermath of the storm, the state assumed authority over 107 of the 128 public schools in the system, forming them into the Recovery School District (RSD). But it was only after the United Teachers of New Orleans filed suit--while pressure escalated from the affected communities amid growing evidence that a large number of children could not get in to any school--that three schools were opened through the RSD at the beginning of 2006. Meanwhile, the state has been evaluating proposals for charter schools, many from entities outside the state. (Charters are public schools not under the authority of the local Board of Education and thus, the hope is, free of stultifying bureaucratic strictures.) The plan is essentially to re-create the system as a virtually all-charter school district.

Charter schools remain controversial. The weight of the research suggests that students in charters typically do no better than students in regular public schools, and frequently do worse. (One part of the problem is that charter operators typically vastly underestimate what it takes to get a school up and running.) Still, we know of some excellent charters around the country and think they can be made to work in New Orleans. Our concerns have to do with the entire school district having few or no viable structures in place to monitor issues of equity for students or the quality of the teaching force, and with a pattern of decision-making that consistently excludes the communities most affected. Charters are just a way to structure school governance. Unless we change the traditional pattern by which the flow of resources has been shaped by race and class politics, we haven't changed anything fundamental.

In a decentralized system, who is responsible for the neediest students? The answer is likely to be no one. It is an invitation to re-create a system deeply segregated by race and class. We have already seen cases of special-needs children being refused admission to schools. According to Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research, last year 2,000 special-needs students were completely locked out of the RSD and charter schools. At the beginning of this school year, there was only one

person on the RSD staff to supervise the placement of 4,000-6,000 special-needs students. One high school, which previously served low-income African-American students and was mostly undamaged by Katrina, has essentially been handed over to Tulane University as a "selective admissions charter," which, since Tulane poured more than \$1 million into building improvements, will serve largely the children of university employees. (And guess what? The school was already filled by late August!) At the extremes, a situation in which no one has to accept responsibility for the neediest children is likely to generate a set of publicly supported neo-segregationist academies, where enforced segregation according to class, special needs and test scores is as likely as segregation by race.

With no one to monitor the workings of schools that are required to maintain a certain level of scores on mandated tests to stay in existence, those students who are less likely to score well may be selected out or "pushed out" through any number of means. That is just what has happened in other parts of the world where charter school movements have taken hold, such as New Zealand, where charter reforms have led to increased segregation of rich and poor. One study reports that in the more elite charter schools, the suggestion to poor parents that their children "might not feel comfortable in this setting" turned into a promise if the parents insisted on registering them.

The staffing problems at New Orleans schools that were the inevitable result of the hurricane have not been handled well. The city school board fired most of the New Orleans teachers a few months after Katrina hit. Many of the charter schools, looking to save money, hired young, inexperienced teachers. Because the teachers' union contract was dismantled, educators hired in these schools could be paid whatever the school chose, and many had to sign a contract stating they would not discuss their salaries or working conditions publicly. One teacher hired in a charter school who brought only three years of experience to the job said that when looking for colleagues to assist her, she found she was the veteran for the entire school. Younger teachers can bring much-needed energy and optimism, but it's unlikely that they alone, without more experienced colleagues, can provide what is needed for traumatized children who have missed significant amounts of school.

The RSD, for its part, got off to a late start in planning for the current school year. As of late August, only 60 percent of the needed teachers were in place. As one would expect with so much late hiring, there have been reports of unusually high attrition rates among teachers. With Christmas looming and 250 new students returning to the city every week, RSD schools are showing an 8 percent vacancy rate for teachers, while the district is planning to open eleven more schools next semester. It is not clear where the instructors for those schools will come from. Meanwhile, FEMA and local officials remain embroiled in a dispute over how many schools need to be rebuilt and at whose expense.

We understand that some decisions had to be made in haste, with the information decision-makers had available to them at the time, and that some had to be made while most residents, certainly most low-income residents, were either out of town or overwhelmed. Even taking that into account, in the last several months we have seen a pattern in which decisions are repeatedly made with only pro-forma attempts to involve the people whose lives will be most affected. Even if the decisions are good ones, sooner or later this will likely cause problems. For example, the policy-makers in Baton Rouge, the state capital, did not work with local communities to determine the best locations for school openings. Consequently, some schools now have many empty slots and others are filled beyond capacity.

We expect to be criticized, among other things, as outsiders sticking our noses into local issues. We will live with that. In the wake of the storm, there was much talk about Americans having "discovered" inequality, having acquired a new appreciation for what happens to the most vulnerable of us when political institutions fail. Now it looks like those same institutions are giving us the equivalent of a school system designed by FEMA. The nation must pay the most careful attention to the children of New Orleans if we don't want the broken levees to sweep away the futures of children as they swept away so many homes and lives.