

# New Orleans Education Reform: A Guide for Cities or a Warning for Communities? (Grassroots Lessons Learned, 2005-2012)

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## Abstract

*Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, co-chair of the Senate Public Charter School Caucus in Washington, DC, hosted a forum for education policymakers. It centered on New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities (Lessons Learned, 2004-2010), a report published by the charter school incubator New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). Through human capital and charter school development, the report asserts, New Orleans has become a national leader in education reform. In this essay, members of Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, including education scholars and those affiliated with longstanding educational and cultural organizations in New Orleans, reveal that such reform has been destructive to African American students, teachers, and neighborhoods. Inspired by critical race theory and the role of experiential knowledge in challenging dominant narratives, authors draw heavily on testimony from community-based education groups, which have typically been ignored, regarding the inequitable effects of New Orleans' school reform. While the Guide for Cities is used as a sounding board for concerns and critiques, this essay challenges claims that have circulated nationally since 2005—ones that laud New Orleans as a model to be followed. This essay also charts the elite policy network that has shaped the city's reform, with NSNO playing a central part, in order to reveal the accumulative interests of education entrepreneurs. A postscript illustrating parent and student resistance to charter school reform in New Orleans reminds urban communities elsewhere that current reforms are not a guide but a threat to those struggling for racial and educational justice.*

**Keywords:** urban education reform, educational policy, charter schools, alternative teacher recruitment, black education, New Orleans, Guide for Cities, New Schools for New Orleans, Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, grassroots resistance

Is education reform in New Orleans a model for urban school districts across the United States? Senator Mary Landrieu (Democrat–Louisiana) believes so. On March 1, 2012, Landrieu, co-chair of the Senate Public Charter School Caucus with Senator Lamar Alexander (Republican–Tennessee), hosted a forum for education policymakers in Washington, DC. The forum centered on a report entitled *New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities (Lessons Learned, 2004-2010)*, published by the charter

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school incubator New Schools for New Orleans (Brinson, Boast, Hassel, & Kingsland, 2012). Landrieu proclaimed:

With its *Guide for Cities*, New Schools for New Orleans is doing the important work of sharing lessons learned throughout the transformation of New Orleans' public schools. Through relentless focus on accountability, human capital, and charter school development, New Orleans has become a national leader in education reform...I hope that this story and the *Guide for Cities* will inspire and equip other cities to follow New Orleans' lead. (Landrieu, 2012, para. 2)

Participating in the discussion with Landrieu was Neerav Kingsland, chief strategy officer for New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) at the time. Kingsland is now chief executive officer (CEO) of NSNO because the organization's founder and former CEO, Sarah Usdin, ran for a seat on Orleans Parish School Board—a point taken up later. At the forum, Kingsland echoed Landrieu's remarks and added: "The New Orleans story is really one of transferring power back to educators and parents—to date, this had led to incredible gains in student learning" (Landrieu, 2012, para. 4).

In this scholarly essay, members of Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, including education researchers and those affiliated with longstanding educational and cultural organizations in New Orleans, articulate their disagreement. Based on our experiential knowledge and qualitative research over nearly a decade, we do not believe that New Orleans school reform represents a guide for cities. Instead we assert that current reforms, including human capital and charter school development, have been immensely destructive to African American students, veteran teachers, and historically black neighborhoods in New Orleans. Ours is a warning for communities nationally. These "reforms" are not a guide for cities; they are a stark threat to the education, cultural integrity, and political-economic power of communities struggling for a semblance of justice.

To make our case, we draw on testimony from community-based education groups and scholarly research on the inequitable effects of New Orleans school reform for students, teachers, and schools targeted by organizations such as NSNO. Our focus will be on human capital and charter school development, and we will use the *Guide for Cities* as a sounding board for our concerns and critiques. However, we want to make clear that in responding to NSNO's *Guide*, we also are speaking back to a larger set of reports that have been written since 2005 about education reform in New Orleans and distributed nationally. The reports noted below, which are examples, follow lines of argument that are similar to the *Guide for Cities*:

- *Born on the Bayou: A New Model for American Education* by Third Way (Osborne, 2012);
- *The Louisiana Recovery School District: Lessons for the Buckeye State* by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Smith, 2012; for a critique, see Buras, 2012c);
- *Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools* by the Mind Trust (2011);
- *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report* by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (Hill et al., 2009);

- *After Katrina: Rebuilding Opportunity and Equity into the New New Orleans* by the Urban Institute (Hill & Hannaway, 2006); and
- *From Tragedy to Triumph: Principled Solutions for Rebuilding Lives and Communities* by the Heritage Foundation (Meese, Butler, & Holmes, 2005).

Additionally, there has been much discussion in the media about the “success” of the New Orleans model. Illustrations are too numerous to compile here; major news outlets, from *Time Magazine* (Isaacson, 2007) and the *New York Times* (Tough, 2008) to the *Wall Street Journal* (Kaminski, 2011) and the *Washington Post* (Armao, 2012), have highlighted New Orleans as a site of innovation, a source of inspiration, and a model for replication. We firmly disagree, and our disagreement is based on an evidentiary record rooted in community experience and almost a decade of research rather than the ungrounded assertions that characterize many of the aforementioned accounts.

Before directly addressing the *Guide* and analyzing its claims, we first describe the critical race methodology that we employed as well as the work of Urban South Grassroots Research Collective. Next, we provide some background on NSNO and education reform in New Orleans since 2005. Following this, the *Guide*’s policy recommendations on human capital and charter school development are examined, and the concerns of longstanding community groups about these policies are considered through testimonies and primary source documents. Finally, we position NSNO within a wider policy network that includes elite actors at the local, state, and national levels, revealing NSNO’s pivotal role in a circuit of education entrepreneurs who seek to transform urban public schools through market-based reforms. We ultimately argue these reforms serve the interests of entrepreneurs rather than the communities at the center of their efforts.

### **Critical Race Methodology and Urban South Grassroots Research Collective**

Critical race theorists have established the pertinence of testimonies by communities of color as an evidentiary record that challenges dominant narratives in law and education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Lawrence, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). Legal scholar Charles Lawrence (1995) explains, “in the white male academy, narrative is valued primarily as an instrument of private expression” and is viewed “as a source of distortion rather than as a resource for understanding” (pp. 345–346). To the contrary, he argues that narrative is an invaluable text “because it is dense in the detailed and moving articulation of the teller’s or subject’s life experience” (p. 346). In order to adequately appraise social conditions, it is imperative to consider the experiential knowledge of those most intimately involved in navigating them. Lawrence (1995) gets to the heart of the matter when he writes:

Stories always refer to a particular context, place, and moment. The historical and cultural setting is critical to the readers’ interpretation of facts, feelings, and understandings...Human problems considered and resolved in the absence of context are often misperceived, misinterpreted, and mishandled...Blacks and others whose stories have been and are excluded from the dominant discourse are more likely to be injured by the error of noncontextual methodology. This is

because the reader considering facts and abstract argument without context will inevitably provide a setting of his or her own. This imaginary, though often unacknowledged, contextualization will be based on his or her own experiences or upon stories that he or she has heard. (p. 345)

He explains that the “imagined context often directly contradicts” the experiences and stories of racially oppressed groups who are directly affected by circumstances and policies (p. 345). This is why critical race theorists have embraced counterstory as a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging majoritarian stories that depict the world from the viewpoint of racially privileged groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009; see also Buras, 2013a). Ultimately, Lawrence (1995) stresses, “Giving narrative form to experience creates a rich evidentiary record for analysis and assessment of complex social processes” (p. 345).

In this essay, we draw heavily on narrative testimony to provide thick description of how education reforms have been experienced by those actually navigating the newly chartered landscape. This is crucial since these voices have been left out of discussions on school reform in New Orleans. The *Guide for Cities* excluded them as well. In fact, it is our contention that NSNO’s *Guide* represents the abstract arguments and decontextualized claims that Lawrence (1995) warns against. The *Guide* is a majoritarian story about education reform in New Orleans, told by those who are imposing the reform and stand to benefit from it the most. The picture looks very different when marginalized groups participate in assessing the reforms. We also draw attention to additional research literature that readers may consult on the racial politics and inequities that characterize the New Orleans education model. However, this essay prioritizes firsthand accounts and the details they provide for analysis; we want to emphasize up front that our accounts are confluent with research findings cited throughout the essay and should not be considered anomalies or anecdotes.

A word on Urban South Grassroots Research Collective (USGRC) is essential before proceeding with our analysis. USGRC was cofounded by education scholars and longstanding grassroots organizations in New Orleans, where experimental education reforms have been implemented since 2005 on a scale heretofore not seen in other cities. This includes development of the nation’s first charter school district and the mass firing of veteran teachers accompanied by a comprehensive program of alternative teacher and school-leader recruitment. Based on a commitment to engaged educational research, scholars, veteran teachers, students, parents, and grassroots organizers affiliated with USGRC: 1) collaborate in developing questions focused on governmental transparency and integrity in public education; 2) engage in grassroots research that highlights the voices, experiences, and concerns of racially and economically marginalized communities; and 3) disseminate research findings locally and nationally in an effort to reinvigorate a public education system that serves *all* communities. Importantly, the collaborating scholars and grassroots organizations in USGRC have a notable history of critical scholarship and social justice activism in New Orleans.

For this essay, the following grassroots member organizations of USGRC contributed writings and documents relevant to NSNO’s *Guide*, and these were used alongside existing scholarship to illuminate concerns about education reform in New Orleans:

- *Students at the Center*: a 20-year-old writing and digital media program cofounded by veteran teachers and students, which is based in New Orleans public schools and informed by civil rights struggles and the history of Free Southern Theater in New Orleans (see Buras 2009; Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010);
- *Guardians Institute*: a school and community-based youth program founded in 1988 that builds on the legacy of Native American and African American resistance in New Orleans, promotes literacy, and upholds the city's distinct cultural and indigenous arts traditions, including multigenerational masking as Mardi Gras Indians;
- *Mos Chukma Institute*: an indigenous healing-arts program housed in a Lower 9th Ward public elementary school founded two decades ago, which draws on Native, African, and African American traditions to develop place-based education, student resiliency, and community agency;
- *Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center*: an organization founded more than two decades ago by parents of two sons with Autism Spectrum disorders, which provides support and assistance to families of children with disabilities in New Orleans;
- *Lower 9 School Development Group*: a coalition of community groups in the Lower 9th Ward, which was organized to fight for rebuilding a neighborhood high school amid exclusionary efforts by master planners to construct schools elsewhere in the city and undermine the restoration of black working-class communities (Buras, 2011a, 2013b);
- *New Teachers' Roundtable*: a group in which early-career educators engage in personal reflection and critical dialogue about racial, cultural, and economic justice in New Orleans and are inspired to take action with their students' communities to build a more liberatory education system; and
- *United Teachers of New Orleans*: the local teacher union, which has represented educators in the city for decades and has a long history of supporting equal pay among black and white teachers, more equitable resources for public schools, and social justice activism in the community.

Thus, the evidentiary record that we draw upon grows out of decades—even centuries—of accumulated knowledge about cultural politics, racial inequities, and struggles for accessible and democratic public education in New Orleans. Education scholar and USGRC researcher Adrienne Dixon provides a postscript, written with parents and students, where they analyze growing student resistance to reforms advocated in the *Guide* (see also Dixon, 2011).

Around the same time that the *Guide* was released, Kristen Buras, co-author of this essay and an education policy scholar who directs USGRC, participated in a forum sponsored by Harvard University's Graduate School of Education entitled "New Orleans Education Reform: Pass or Fail?" Usdin, the aforementioned founder and former CEO of NSNO, was the other participant. The two issues at the center of this essay—human capital and charter school development—were vigorously debated (for video recorded forum, see Buras, 2012b). Usdin, like many of those who advocate these reforms, ignored

the viewpoints and experiences of those on the ground. This now familiar dynamic sets the stage for the analysis we will present. Our concern rests with communities across this nation that stand to lose, and to lose dearly, if the reforms in New Orleans are “taken to scale” in their own backyards.

In the *Guide*’s foreword, Kingsland and Usdin acknowledge, “Tens of thousands of students, families, teachers, and leaders make up the New Orleans system, and we are in no position to speak for all of them” (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 11). We could not agree more. In fact, we have grave concerns that the stakeholders who were consulted for the *Guide* included only advocates of current reforms, such as state and district officials, charter school leaders, support organization leaders, education reformers and experts, and philanthropists (p. 9). It is empirically unsound to make claims about the effects of reforms without consulting the communities that are targeted and most intimately affected by those reforms. This is where we enter, building on testimony and documentation provided by those who historically have worked in and have had children who have attended the public schools of New Orleans. First, some background on NSNO will be helpful.

### **A Brief History of New Schools for New Orleans**

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005, a vacuum was created and Louisiana’s governor and legislators, partly prompted by federal pressure and resources, immediately stepped in to renovate state law and prepare the ground for mass experimentation with charter schools. By October, Governor Kathleen Blanco had signed Executive Orders 58 and 79 suspending certain provisions of charter school law, such as the need to consult and obtain the votes of affected faculty, staff, and parents before converting an existing public school into a charter school (Louisiana Federation of Teachers & American Federation of Teachers, 2007). In early November, Blanco called a special legislative session. This was the occasion for passing Act 35, which redefined what constituted a “failing” school so that most of New Orleans public schools could be deemed failing and placed in the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Act 35 enabled 107 of 128 schools to be folded into the RSD; only 13 schools could have been subsumed before the legislation was passed (United Teachers of New Orleans [UTNO], Louisiana Federation of Teachers, & American Federation of Teachers, 2006). During this same period, an announcement went out that 7,500 New Orleans teachers and school employees would be fired in January 2006, enabling the recruitment of new “human capital” to the city (UTNO, Louisiana Federation of Teachers, & American Federation of Teachers, 2007).

At the local level, Mayor Ray Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), which recommended the creation of the nation’s first charter school district (BNOB, 2006). Private education providers would operate charter schools and exercise control over budgets, hiring, and firing. As BNOB’s plans were being issued, the federal government already had begun providing millions of dollars for the establishment of charter schools in New Orleans (UTNO, Louisiana Federation of Teachers, & American Federation of Teachers, 2006). In short, laws were changed and passed and corresponding plans were made while the residents of New Orleans, largely African American, remained displaced (for a more extensive account of local, state, and

federal policy actors during this period, see Buras, 2011b).

Assisted by state policies, education entrepreneurs and business leaders promptly made plans to begin work in the newly reformed landscape of New Orleans (Buras 2005, 2007, 2011b, 2014; Buras et al., 2010). NSNO took the lead. Founded in early 2006, NSNO is committed to human capital and charter school development. Its strategy is fivefold as it seeks (a) founders to *start* charter schools, (b) principals to *lead* charter schools, (c) teachers to *teach* in charter schools, (d) members to *serve* on charter school boards, and (e) investors and philanthropists to *contribute* to these efforts (NSNO 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). For example, its Incubation Program provides “resources to new school founders in the year before opening” and announces, “If you are an experienced, dynamic, entrepreneurial educator...then this is your chance” (NSNO, n.d., p. 7). From 2007 to 2010, the organization launched 10 charter schools, seeded 3 local charter management organizations, and provided 21 start-up grants that have supported over 90% of newly approved charter schools (NSNO, 2010b).

NSNO has partnered with the national organization New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) to recruit, train, and place principals and other school leaders in the public schools of New Orleans. “In schools, just as with businesses, strong leadership breeds results,” reads its literature (NSNO, 2008a, para 1). By 2010, NSNO (2010b) boasted of training 36 charter school boards for over 90% of charter schools in the city. To facilitate this effort, NLNS maintains a Board Bank that includes the names and résumés of parties wishing to serve on charter school boards and makes them available to schools. The qualifications that NLNS expects from Board Bank members reveal the raced and classed dimensions of charter school governance. “Expertise in law, real estate, financial management, governance, marketing, fund raising, community organizing/outreach, education, or strategic planning” and “experience with entrepreneurship” are considered key assets and are ones most likely possessed by well-heeled reformers (NSNO, 2010a).

An additional human capital initiative is teachNOLA, a teacher recruitment collaboration between the RSD and The New Teacher Project (TNT), a national organization that “works with clients on a fee-for-service basis” to place “alternate route teachers” in “high-need schools” (TNT, 2010). TeachNOLA claims to have “eliminated the city’s teaching shortage so that there can now be an increased focus on long-term quality” (NSNO, 2010b). Skirting the fact that the shortage was engineered through state policy and the mass firing of black veteran educators, NSNO applauds teachNOLA for placing new teachers in 96% of the city’s charter schools by 2010 (NSNO, 2010b). Most of the alternatively recruited teachers are white, inexperienced, and often replace more experienced and more expensive veteran educators who are indigenous to the community and unionized (Goodman, 2006; Nelson, 2010; UTNO, 2010; UTNO et al., 2007).

NSNO has received millions from nationally recognized, market-oriented venture philanthropies and from the federal government as part of its Investing in Innovation program (i3) through Race to the Top (Chang, 2010b; Maxwell, 2007; NSNO, 2012c). In fact, the *Guide* was written “to meet the [i3] requirement that grantees disseminate the lessons of their work” (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 9). In sum, NSNO has been at the forefront of human capital recruitment and the incubation of charter schools and charter school management organizations and this work continues apace (NSNO, 2010b, 2011).

By the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, 65 of 90 public schools in Orleans

Parish were operating as charter schools, with 77% of students attending charter schools (Cowen Institute, 2011). New Orleans has the highest proportion of charter schools in the nation, which brings us to the purpose of NSNO's *Guide*. In the *Guide*'s foreword, Kingsland and Usdin stress: "If numerous cities undertook this course, our urban education landscape could be transformed over the next decade....We hope this guide will serve cities who wish to begin this difficult work" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 11).

It would be wrong to assume that such reforms have proceeded without resistance from affected communities. We now turn to the testimonies of longstanding community groups and relevant policy scholarship to raise questions about the *Guide* and warn education scholars, policymakers, and urban communities across the nation about the destructive reforms that education entrepreneurs hope to spread. What follows are some of the lessons we have learned since 2005.<sup>2</sup>

### Human Capital Development

*First Lesson: Marginalization of indigenous veteran teachers and leaders is viewed as innovative by education entrepreneurs, who recruit inexperienced staff to teach in charter schools at the expense of our children.*

It helps to recall Kingsland's words at the Washington, DC forum where Landrieu hailed the *Guide*. "The New Orleans story is really one of transferring power back to educators and parents," he proclaimed (Landrieu, 2012, para. 4). As we will show, this assertion is perverse in light of the evidence.

The *Guide* stresses that "strong charter growth requires high-quality teachers and leaders" and warns, "empowering underprepared educators is a dismal strategy" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 24). In our view, this is precisely what NSNO has done—empowered underprepared educators—through its human capital initiatives. While the *Guide* emphasizes that it is important to "empower existing talent," meaning local veteran teachers, the larger focus is on "recruiting new teachers and leaders" (p. 24) from beyond the city. "To effectively scale up a charter sector, cities must make themselves magnets for innovative talent" (p. 24), suggests the *Guide*. This is essential for attracting "national talent organizations," such as Teach for America (TFA) or TNTP, and thus a city aspiring to replicate the New Orleans model should create a "buzz" and "market itself as one that embraces bold reforms" (p. 24).

Short shrift is given to the role of veteran educators in an environment of bold reforms. In fact, the *Guide* explains, "Veteran educators may be skeptical of charter reforms" (p. 24). The reasons for this are not examined, although we explore them below. Instead the *Guide* indicates: "Effective, experienced teachers possess the knowledge and expertise honed through their years of teaching. They bring strong classroom management and deep experience in instruction, a *boon to a young charter staff*" (p. 25; emphasis added). Here again, the emphasis is on young charter staff as the fulcrum for innovation and charter school development. The *Guide* provides the following advice:

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<sup>2</sup> Because this essay is coauthored with members of USGRC and the original handwritten testimonies upon which we draw are not publicly available, page numbers are not cited when members are quoted.



Cities should also use alternative certification organizations such as TFA or TNTP to staff their growing charter sector's schools...TFA is increasingly a market requirement. Many high-quality charter operators will not enter a market without a TFA presence, making clear the connection between human capital and charter growth. (p. 25)

In New Orleans, the *Guide* boasts, "30% of the city's teachers come from either TFA or TNTP."

The *Guide* does not examine what allegedly was wrong with the veteran teachers who were fired. It is implicitly assumed they were responsible for the failure of New Orleans public schools prior to 2005, thereby necessitating the recruitment of "new talent." There is no discussion of the history of racial inequality, white flight, and state disinvestment that contributed to the crisis in the city's public schools. For example, the first publicly funded high school for black students in New Orleans did not open until 1917 and opened only because of community struggle and protest; the second did not open until 1942. Black teachers with the same level of education and experience as white teachers were paid substantially less, while black students attended poorly maintained, overcrowded, and grossly underfunded schools. These also were conditions challenged by black teachers. The era of desegregation brought massive resistance by whites. From 1950–2000, New Orleans lost two-thirds of its white residents and state disinvestment in black education continued (Baker, 1996; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991). From the *Guide's* ahistorical standpoint, it appears black teachers somehow are responsible for the dire conditions they actually spent their lives fighting.

The *Guide* likewise fails to examine what precisely constitutes new teacher "talent" and why organizations such as TFA and TNTP should be considered "talent organizations." In one vignette provided in the *Guide*, entitled "Hire for Potential," readers learn about the efforts of Sean Gallagher to hire staff for Akili Academy of New Orleans, a charter school that Gallagher founded with support from NSNO. "The majority of teachers he ultimately hired," explained the *Guide*, "were inexperienced, nearly all from beyond New Orleans, and from Teach for America or other alternative routes" (p. 26). The vignette continues, "Despite his teachers' limited experience, Gallagher has been able to put together a staff that gets academic results for students" (p. 26). He hired those with the "necessary mission alignment and work ethic" (p. 26), which is all that seemingly is required to teach well. Yet Gallagher himself conceded that hiring such a high proportion of first-year teachers (who were uncertified) has required "an intentional focus on lesson planning" (p. 26). However, he went on to note, "Our teachers write lesson plans that are 50 times better than the ones I wrote in my tenth year of teaching. So even if they are *not yet excellent at the execution of those plans* because they're new to teaching, their lessons are *still going somewhere* and students are learning" (p. 26; emphasis added). This begs the question: If human capital initiatives are truly about recruiting the best and most "talented" teachers, shouldn't these teachers be excellent in the execution of their lessons?

Our own experiences and those documented by education researchers tell us that talent and excellence are not the most accurate descriptors of inexperienced teachers recruited through organizations such as TFA and TNTP. Over the course of a decade, for

example, Veltri (2010) taught, observed, and interviewed hundreds of TFA teachers in urban schools and documented high turnover, inadequate pedagogic preparation, teaching out-of-field (including special education), class and race incongruence with students, and many other challenges. Speaking of TFA teachers, an experienced teacher in one school shared with Veltri: “They’re smart; they’re dedicated; but they haven’t got a clue....It’s like they’re playing like they’re a teacher” (pp. 109–110). Indeed, many relied on a “trial and error” approach and “fillers” to get through the day and often the years, with 90% departing after three years. “The first year they try to figure out what they’re doing,” another veteran teacher explained, “and the second year they figure out where they’re going” (p. 37). Concerns about the effects of teacher experience and turnover on student achievement have been well documented (see also Heilig & Jez, 2010; Wilson, 2009).

Reflecting on “new talent coming to the rescue” in New Orleans, one member of New Teachers’ Roundtable, founded by TFA alumni-in-exile for early career teachers in New Orleans who wish to become more critical about teaching and racial injustice, disclosed the following:

TFA seemed like it would be a way to get started in teaching. I assumed based on their advertising that their summer training, while short, was state of the art and that I would have opportunities to observe great teaching and be mentored by seasoned veterans with impressive records. While at training for a total of five weeks, I team taught maybe ten 45-minute periods of math and reading to a group of 15 third graders. While our five weeks had been grueling, I couldn’t say the time was well spent. What I remember is lots of busy work and pep rallies.

Even worse, he reported, a significant amount of time at summer training “was spent practicing how to justify our position as white middle-class teachers of mostly poor children of color.” The response was made clear: TFA teachers would “overcome all possible cultural conflict” through “relentless work” and “high expectations.” But what did these things mean exactly?

“For all their talk of holding children to high academic standards,” wrote this former TFA teacher, “I felt completely confined by the draconian structure of the lessons that were modeled for us.” He reports:

There was no room for critical thinking. Opportunities to speak were mainly restricted to reading the objectives or “key points” from a piece of butcher paper next to the “teacher.” There was no open-ended group work. The proper answer to every question was utterly clear, visible from your desk on the butcher paper, or drilled incessantly through the “lesson.”

Needless to say, when this TFA recruit was assigned to teach in New Orleans, he “felt like an impostor.” He reflected, “I hadn’t even taught before, not to mention the fact that I had never before stood alone in a classroom full of students.” What is more, although now responsible for students’ learning, he still had not been connected with a veteran teacher for much-needed mentorship. He likened his experience to a fatally flawed rescue mission with students suffering the dire consequences:

I was considered “new talent” and sent to New Orleans to rescue poor black children from a failing public school system. The reinforcements sent to rescue the children were unprepared and untrained. It was like being dropped from a helicopter to rescue the stranded and wounded with no tools and no capacity to give them access to what they needed. All this occurred while experienced, professional rescuers, veteran teachers, were essentially being asked to keep out.

He lamented that the space for new teachers was created when the state-controlled Orleans Parish School Board illegally fired all of its employees in early 2006.

Another TFA teacher, one affiliated with New Teachers’ Roundtable and United Teachers of New Orleans, the city’s teacher union, expressed grave concerns about the misinformation propagated by TFA:

Having studied Sociology and Africana Studies in college, clearly I was equipped to enter a public school system and classroom of all students of color, wasn’t I? That’s what TFA told me anyway. I (and hundreds of others pretty similar to me) was just the person to touch a few lives and potentially be a “transformational teacher.” I would later find out this was not true. Despite what TFA says, teaching is actually very hard.

This recruit questioned whether or not TFA and other human capital providers are prepared to deliver on their promises. In the end, aspirations alone do not produce high performance, especially in a profession as complex as teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Wilson, 2009).

A TFA teacher with like affiliations pondered difficult lessons from what she symbolically called “Super Charter School,” indicating that her experiences were similar to other new recruits teaching in New Orleans’ charters. She recollected an exchange with the principal of Super Charter when a group of visitors from another charter school was observing her school. “If I could I would clone [her] and make 50 more of her,” he beamed to the visitors in her presence. She wondered why. After all, she went on to say, this “comes from a man who evaluated the effectiveness of our teaching by the extent to which we were all at the same place, at the same time, in the same pre-approved, administration-sanctioned, standardized lesson.” Sadly, in Super Charter, “the treatment of teachers as replaceable, mechanized parts within a well-oiled, so-called “ed-reform-movement” extended to seeing all of our students as passive, empty vessels, desperately needing to be filled by our unimaginative, over-scripted lesson plans.” The shared language that pervaded the school was most telling: noise level zero; eyes tracking the speaker; hold your bodies still—your voices are off, your eyes are on me; sit in scholar position; hands down, I am speaking. “As the months passed,” she admitted, “the system began to break me, too.” Not without irony, a core value of Super Charter was innovation, also lauded in the *Guide*. This TFA teacher’s analysis disrupts the discourse that new teachers and new charter schools bring real innovation and excellence—a lesson to be heeded by communities seen as the next “market” for human capital and charter school development.

The consequences of all of this are made brutally clear through the story of one veteran teacher and union member in New Orleans. Her story is not completely unique

and sheds light on the tragic face of human capital development. Returning to the city after the storm, this veteran teacher hoped to assist in reopening the public high school where she had taught for 30 years; she was heartbroken to return and find that her cherished collection of yearbooks going back to the 1970s had been destroyed. Thus she welcomed the chance to spend the next summer enrolling students, although it would be a “new” era in the school’s history. The school now would be privately managed as a charter school. Her excitement was short-lived:

Daily, I realize that this new school is not the old one. It is not the family atmosphere that we had built through tradition. It has become a business venture, with the focus on dollar signs and test scores. Time and again, I remember a colleague’s words of distrust about charter schools. I begin to understand his mistrust and to develop my own.

Teaching, she feared, was taking a back seat to entrepreneurial considerations.

Several years before the storm, this veteran teacher developed a college writing course that she taught with stellar results. “Almost every student who took the class was placed in regular college English rather than remedial, which had not been the case earlier,” she explains. The school’s new operator said it could not afford to offer the class. At the end of her third year at her newly chartered high school, the faculty chose her for a teaching award. Nonetheless, she received news that her contract would not be renewed because, as she was told, “her value did not outweigh her liability.” In short, the school could hire two and one-half teachers for the same cost as an experienced teacher.

The next year she taught at another charter high school in New Orleans. She regretfully shared, “It is not long before I realize that their promises of support are theoretical at best.” She discovered that her “tried and true methods of teaching are not respected” and that she was expected to “teach according to the instructions of a woman who has never been in the classroom as a teacher.” She was once again told at the end of the year that her contract would not be renewed, but refused to accept the decision this time. After much pressing, she was offered a part-time position as community service coordinator for \$17,000 rather than the \$56,000 she was earning. To the administration’s surprise, she accepted. Meanwhile, they hired several more “inexpensive, uncertified, recent college graduates” to teach in her place. As she worked on various projects in her new role, she saw “a parade of English teachers” come through. In fact:

Four different first-year teachers took a turn teaching the class I had taught for a lifetime. After each one is fired or resigns, students ask why I am not their teacher. After all, I am right there in the building. But instead of returning me to the classroom, another inexperienced young person is hired to give it a whirl.

Over December break, the existing principal was fired and the new principal fired the veteran teacher. This teacher reports:

I refuse to leave and tell her that I will work for free until she can find the funds to pay me. The faculty is shocked by my boldness, but I must stand up for what I believe in. This school has no band, no choir, no football, baseball, or soccer

team...only a basketball team, about which the administration complains incessantly because it costs money. How can we rebuild New Orleans if we do not rebuild its youth?

Meager funds were found to pay the teacher and she continued her work the next year, this time teaching a class on community service. She arranged for an investigator from the Innocence Project to visit her class and they learned about a man imprisoned for almost 20 years in Angola, Louisiana's state prison, for a crime he did not commit. "When we asked permission to attend a hearing for his case," she recollects, "I was told that we cannot go, because students would miss 'meaningful instruction.'" The students planned to visit Angola with her on a school holiday, and it was one of the most powerful experiences of their lives. Clearly, she ponders, "The administration and I don't seem to have the same definition of 'meaningful instruction.'"

Meanwhile, the constant turnover of new teachers has continued and the faculty of this largely black high school is currently more than 90% white and mostly from other states. Ultimately, this veteran teacher concluded, "The teaching profession cannot survive when the majority of those in classrooms are not there because they want to teach." Instead, she asserted, many came because loans will be forgiven through sponsoring programs. What about the pipeline of talent that TFA and other human capital initiatives were supposed to deliver?

Another veteran teacher and union member considered the political dynamics behind reforms advocated in the *Guide*, giving special consideration to the mass firing of experienced educators. Prior to 2005, this highly qualified teacher was the lead mentor on a U.S. Department of Education grant to the New Orleans public schools to improve the teaching of American history. She wrote: "Thousands of highly qualified educators will educate children in other states and districts because they have been denied jobs in the new charter schools and the state-run Recovery School District." This seasoned educator worried that charter schools "want to hire inexperienced teachers so that they can pay them little or no money and also so that they can treat them like sharecroppers, or better still like slaves, with no rights and no input or say about what happens in the schools."

In the *Guide's* foreword, Kingsland and Usdin mentioned that after the storm, "the district laid off every teacher, which led to a lawsuit that remains in court" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 10). At the very least, this would suggest the claim that New Orleans-style reform empowered educators is contested. This is never acknowledged. Rather, the *Guide's* history of reform in New Orleans states: "*Without a student body* to serve, Orleans Parish School Board was forced to terminate contracts with all teachers, effectively disbanding the teachers' union." In the very next sentence, without noting any contradiction, the account continues: "In November 2005, the Recovery School District's scope was expanded, and it took over nearly all schools in New Orleans to meet the *needs of the returning student population*" (Brinson et al., p. 15; emphasis added). Thus the *Guide* says veteran teachers were fired due to the absence of a student body, while at the same time it says schools were taken over to better serve a returning student body. Such inconsistencies characterize the discourse of education entrepreneurs who advance a narrative on human capital that serves them, but fails to square with the facts. The mass firing of veteran teachers was far from inevitable.

Less than six months after the *Guide* was released, the Civil District Court for Orleans Parish ruled that state education officials had used the storm as an excuse for the illegal mass firing of teachers and that their actions were part of a political strategy to takeover and charter New Orleans public schools (Civil District Court, 2012). For example, the court found the following:

- The Louisiana Department of Education and Orleans Parish School Board asserted that there was a shortage of teachers to hire. By October 2005, however, education officials had located nearly all Orleans Parish School Board employees, including thousands of certified teachers who had provided updated contact information and intent to return forms. Rather than hiring these teachers, the Louisiana Department of Education advertised nationwide for teacher positions with the RSD.
- Although there were thousands of certified, experienced Orleans Parish School Board teachers, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a contract with TFA on April 20, 2006.
- Although the Louisiana Department of Education received over \$500 million from the U.S. Department of Education based on the representation that it needed to pay the salaries and benefits of out-of-work school employees, it did not ensure that any of this money was used in such a manner. Rather, the money was diverted to the RSD and used in part to offer signing bonuses and housing allowances to teachers recruited from out-of-state. (pp. 20–22)

The tenured teachers who were fired illegally were not empowered by current reforms. Veteran teachers constituted a substantial portion of New Orleans' black middle class. This fact cannot be considered apart from human capital initiatives that ensued in 2006 through the efforts of NSNO and that continue into the present.

Recruiting human capital is not NSNO's sole priority. Charter school development is another closely related initiative.

### **Charter School Development**

*Second Lesson: The development and expansion of privately managed charter schools threaten to restructure public education as a business, with indigenous traditions and place-based curricula giving way to management practices that have little connection to students and what they need to achieve and thrive.*

The *Guide* delineates three strategies for taking the so-called charter school market to scale in cities nationwide: (a) converting existing traditional schools into charter schools; (b) incubating new charter schools; and (c) supporting the development of charter-management organizations (CMOs). In the first case, would-be entrepreneurs are advised, "A city's charter market can take time to develop if charter growth relies solely on new-start schools or focuses solely on the takeover of the lowest performing schools" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 28). The most ideal strategy, according to the *Guide*, is "converting a portion of a city's best schools early in the process," which "can quickly open the local market and increase the performance of already-successful educators" (pp. 28–29).

We find the recommendation to charter a city's best public schools remarkable. Education entrepreneurs have argued that privately managed charter schools are necessary because of the failure of government-run public schools. These bureaucratic entities, the argument goes, have no impetus to innovate or improve (Brinson et al., 2012; Broad, 2012a). Nonetheless, the *Guide* advocates chartering the "best schools" in order to open the local market and enhance existing achievement. In short, then, the *Guide* proposes that entrepreneurs leverage the success of public education as their own, thereby justifying further penetration of public education by market forces, which are presented as the solution. This is ironic to say the least. It is therefore even more ironic that privately chartering a well-run public school can undermine student achievement, especially when the concerns of operators are market-driven.

The story of a New Orleans high school student illuminates this last point. Writing for Students at the Center, mentioned earlier as a longstanding literacy program that builds on the voices and experiences of young people, this student reflects on the conversion of his public elementary school into a charter school after Katrina. He expresses pride in his academic performance prior to 2005, sharing: "When I began school, I immediately became attached to the environment. Whenever my first grade teacher asked students to read, I would always raise my hand high in the air. Reading evoked my imagination." By the time he entered second grade, he was reading several grade levels ahead. By fifth grade, he had decided, "I want to be a teacher when I grow up." This public elementary school in New Orleans was working; his reading and his aspirations were a testimony to this. Returning after the storm, he once again attended this school, only this time it had been chartered. In fact, it was a charter school supported by NSNO. His experiences are illuminating:

My first day of 7th grade was a total shock to me—it was no longer my school. It was foreign to me: new paint, new teachers, new principal. Practically everything was new, except for some familiar faces of students I knew. The school was heavily promoted during orientation, which took place at some fancy hall. The people who ran our school showed us a video of how successful charter schools were run across the country. I couldn't believe my eyes as I watched these perfect kids on the big projector with their perfect smiles as if they were receiving the perfect education.

However, my school was nothing like that. One of the odd things I noticed most at school were the teachers. They were all young, very young. I still remember my 7th grade teacher. She was supposedly just my math teacher (the only subject she was qualified to teach), but then she discovered that she had to teach my class all core subjects. I began to realize that something was wrong when she spent more of her time burying her face in lesson plans than acknowledging the curious faces of students. I began to hate school. My classmates began to feel the same way too. We grew tired of this school. What ever happened to the promised education we saw on the screen at orientation?

In his preexisting public elementary school, this student developed a passion for reading and even aspired to be a teacher. In his newly chartered school, one that was supposed to be much improved, he "began to hate school."

Out of frustration and desperation, students decided to confront the teacher. This student reports: “She broke down in tears and exclaimed to us that she was just in her first year of teaching and was attending graduate school simultaneously. I thought to myself, what has happened to my city?” This seems like a good question to ask in light of the *Guide*’s suggestion that converting public schools, especially good ones, to charter schools will make them even better. It is important to note that this student’s account is not unique. Many students in New Orleans have expressed concerns about the conversion of their schools to charters (see Buras et al., 2010). In the postscript, Dixson, Bigard, and student activists discuss a student walkout, which occurred when an NSNO-supported CMO planned to take over a historic high school.

The *Guide* also suggests incubating new charter schools—that is, supporting start-ups rather than solely converting existing public schools into charter schools. Once more, the recommendations provided are worrisome. After selecting a leader or entrepreneur to start a charter school, the process is described as follows:

Incubators often run fellowship programs, providing a salary for a year or more while offering intensive training in *leadership, management, and finance*. ...[School leaders] *learn what works*, and visit or work in successful schools. In the year before the school opens, leaders identify and hire *management teams* that can plan together. (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 29; emphasis added)

Not a single word is dedicated to culturally relevant pedagogy, curriculum, or community involvement. Education is understood in financial and managerial terms, and apparently, those who open charter schools can “learn what works” without doing much more than visiting or working in other schools for a limited period. What is more, the *Guide* underscores the importance of incubation programs that provide support services, such as recruiting charter school board members, for “school founders who lack local community connections” (p. 29). Of course, this suggests a very serious question: Should anyone who lacks community connections actually start or lead a school attended by our children? This seems more than troublesome in our view.

Mos Chukma Institute, an indigenous arts program based in a longstanding Lower 9th Ward elementary school in New Orleans, illuminates why such reform is problematic. In its program, by contrast, students “connect with their culture, community, and personal inner resiliency.” Essential to this work is:

...integrating Native, African, and African American teaching stories. The stories and songs are also correlated with indigenous science and local ecosystems: the wetlands, the bayou, the river. These teachings, these ways, of place-based education bring connection and engagement to our students; they reveal the science of the natural world and our place within it.

A majority of the school’s teachers are veteran educators who were born and raised in New Orleans and have more than 25 years of experience in the classroom. Artist-educators with Mos Chukma Institute explain:

Students do not question the commitment of their teachers. The teachers are



sophisticated, master teachers whose dedication goes beyond the classroom. The children can feel this—they understand the difference between a community member and a visitor; someone who has one foot out the door, someone who does not try to understand them or may have another agenda entirely. We do not expose our children to first-year teachers who struggle to teach and who struggle harder to learn about the communities they are teaching in.

They stress, “Here we enjoy pursuing and answering our own questions, not out-of-life-context questions posed by folks who don’t even know us.” That is to say, the incubation of schools by those outside the community and by those who view education as a business enterprise is an affront to the cultural identity and integrity of students. These artist-educators warn:

In the new charter school model being imposed on our schools, we see a reflection of a world riddled with crime as our students are treated like inmates prepared for death row, made to wear uniforms like Wal-Mart employees, and subjected to remedial tasks such as penciling in boxes and walking on taped lines in the hallway.

Contrary to this model, Mos Chukma Institute “teaches its students culturally relevant history and gives them the freedom to create their own.”

In a similar way, the Guardians Institute in New Orleans builds on centuries-old traditions of racial resistance, ensuring that historic cultural practices are connected to youth development and education. Guardians Institute was founded by Herreast and Donald Harrison, the legendary Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, a Mardi Gras Indian group known for its hand-beaded suits and ritualized processions in honor of those who resisted racial oppression in colonial and antebellum Louisiana. These resisters included Native Americans who acted in solidarity with people of African descent (Kennedy, 2010). The cultural and educational work of the Guardians Institute is too extensive to document here, but a few illustrations will demonstrate the contrast between imposed and indigenous models of schooling. Guardians Institute sponsors *Sankofa Saturdays*, providing time for community elders to educate youth in the traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians. This involves careful study of history, art, song, music, and performance. Additionally, *Big Chief Donald Harrison Book Club* provides culturally relevant literature to children free-of-charge in classroom and community settings. Art and literacy activities, including presentations and performances by community members, accompany the ceremonious distribution and reading of books. With little financial support, 33,000 books valued at over \$400,000 have been placed in the hands of children in New Orleans (Guardians Institute, n.d.; Woods, 2009). It is alarming, then, to note that one of the Harrison daughters, who taught for 25 years in the city’s public schools and who plays a fundamental role in this work, was among the veteran teachers fired in early 2006.

It is nothing short of an assault on the dignity and epistemology of black communities in New Orleans to assume that talented teachers, innovative leaders, and educational institutions need to be “incubated” from without, especially when there are such rich cultural traditions from within. Herreast Harrison donated land she owns in

New Orleans' 9th Ward for construction of a facility that will house a museum, classroom, library, and performance space. The facility will be designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) site (Guardians Institute, n.d.).

Lastly, the *Guide* suggests that taking charter schools to scale through the development of charter management organizations (CMOs) is a priority. "Many of the supports needed to incubate a new CMO are similar to those required to start a stand-alone school," states the *Guide*, "but starting a CMO poses additional challenges." More specifically, CMO leaders manage multiple facilities, have more extensive back-office and legal requirements, and must orchestrate instructional and human capital efforts across schools in the network. If stand-alone charter school operators are akin to "small business owners," then "CMO leaders must manage the difficulties of operating a high-growth corporation" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 31). To imagine and reconstruct schools in this manner is to alter in fundamental ways what it means to educate children, who we are asked to entrust to a corporation.

This is not a promising model to follow, especially when scholars have documented that charter schools do not outperform traditional public schools and often perform worse (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Miron (2010) examined and synthesized the findings on student achievement in charter schools from a wide range of studies—ones varying by design and quality—and found that the general conclusion that could be drawn ten years ago remains the same today. "The overall picture," he writes, "indicates that charter schools perform at levels similar to those of traditional public schools." Notably, the inclusion of lower-quality studies "did little to change the overall findings" and studies done by independent researchers "tended to have a wide array of outcomes, with some positive, but most with mixed or slightly negative findings" (pp. 86–87).

Despite the *Guide*'s claims about increased student achievement, charter schools in New Orleans are failing. Drawing on school performance data and letter grades provided by the RSD in 2011, Hatfield (2012) provided the following summary:

- 100% of the 15 state-run RSD schools assigned a letter grade received a "D" or "F";
- 79% of the 42 charter RSD schools assigned a letter grade received a "D" or "F"; and
- RSD schools that have been open for less than three years were not assigned a letter grade.

The inaccuracy of claims about increased student achievement is addressed elsewhere in greater depth (see Buras, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Hatfield, 2012; UTNO, 2011). In sum, it is evident that the charter school model is not serving our children's best interests.

### **Special Education and the New Orleans Model**

*Third Lesson: Rather than universally respecting students' right to learn, charter schools focus on cost containment in special education and may exclude or fail to adequately serve students based on such concerns.*

The *Guide* sets forth a number of suggestions on special education. These are important to consider because charter schools in the RSD have significantly fewer special education students than state-run public schools in the RSD, 8% and 13%, respectively (Cowen Institute, 2011, p. 7). The *Guide* acknowledges, “Nationally, questions have been raised about charter schools’ ability to provide adequate special education services or, worse, whether schools actively discourage students with disabilities from attending their school” (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 37). Nonetheless, the *Guide* fails to mention that the same questions have been raised about charter schools in New Orleans, an issue addressed by Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center below.

It is distressing to read through the *Guide*’s suggestions on special education. Cities adopting the New Orleans model are encouraged to do some of the following:

- Allow charters to develop specialized programs for certain disabilities so that parents have choices that include programs tailored to their children’s needs, and so that economies of scale can be captured in program delivery;
- Create risk pools that individual schools can participate in to cover the potential costs of serving students with high needs; and
- Create mandatory training for charter school leaders, board members, and special education coordination before the school opens. (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 37)

For those families, educators, and scholars with an intimate knowledge of special education and the rights of special education students, a number of problems are apparent here (e.g., Welner & Howe, 2005). The notion that each charter school should develop a specialized program for certain disabilities sounds like segregation. This defies the principle of mainstreaming in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and sets charter schools down a path of potentially violating federal law. Moreover, there is the distinct impression that such suggestions address charter schools’ concerns about the financial costs of serving special education students, rather than concerns directly associated with students’ right to learn. The fact that charter school operators are urged to provide training on special education *before* opening the school speaks to the disregard that has characterized this sector more generally. In the *Guide*, special education appears as an afterthought or a matter of cost containment for charter schools. It certainly should not be.

Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center (Pyramid) was established in New Orleans in the early 1990s by parents of children with disabilities, and it supports families with special needs children in the city’s public schools. Pyramid has “worked through placement and due process issues as well as behavioral challenges at school and mediations” for over 20 years. Advocates with Pyramid, however, warn:

Stepping back into New Orleans to deal with the redevelopment of the educational system after the storm was traumatic on multiple levels. The families we worked with had evacuated, schools were destroyed in many parts of the city, and the networks of people working for quality public education were obliterated. From this point forward the forces that represented privatization of public education, destruction of unions and the undermining of democratic control of schools became the driving force for educational change.

The climate in which NSNO issued its *Guide* is described as “one characterized by misinformation and disregard for truth.” Part of this disregard relates to special education students and is evidenced in the *Guide*’s recommendations. Advocates with Pyramid are aghast:

Not once are the concepts of inclusion, Individualized Education Planning (IEP) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mentioned as foundational aspects of the provision of services to children with disabilities. There is also no mention of connection with federally funded parent organizations that have a documented history of advocating for and supporting families of children with disabilities. Even after their experience with special education over the past seven years, the so-called reformers fail to grasp that there is a body of rights about which they should be aware. These protections do not need to be reinvented or edited for charter schools.

Needless to say, terminologies such as “economies of scale” and “risk pools” do not sit well with special education advocates, those who respect federal law, or those who are concerned that inclusion “will be supplanted in favor of some form of segregation of children with disabilities.”

Unfortunately, these worries are not unfounded. In October 2010, a federal civil rights lawsuit (*P.B. et al. v. Pastorek*) documenting violations of IDEA in more than 30 schools in the RSD was filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2010a). This class action lawsuit represented some 4,500 students with disabilities who asserted that they were denied appropriate services and/or access to public schools in New Orleans, the majority of them charters. In one case, for example, an eight-year-old student who is blind and developmentally delayed applied to eight different charter schools. Five said they would take the application but could not accommodate him; a sixth said it would accept him but was stretched thin; and a seventh said it had a solid program but access was not guaranteed due to a selective application process. The eighth school, which he attended, “had no services, materials, or support staff to help him” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010b). The lawsuit is ongoing, but the evidence appears compelling. We question whether or not such actions are a guide for cities, especially when reformers legitimize their efforts by claiming to serve those students most in need, even as they are excluded.

### **Top-Down Education Reform and the Paradox of Choice**

*Fourth Lesson: Human capital and charter school development are reforms imposed from above without genuine community engagement regarding how to improve local public schools.*

There are serious concerns about whose decision it was to implement and whose interests are being served by human capital and charter school development in New Orleans. The issue of “building community demand for dramatic reforms” was taken up at the end of the *Guide*. “Failing to inform and engage communities can hobble citywide efforts to scale charters,” reads the *Guide* (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 33). It is conceded that

“the early stages of reform in New Orleans were not—to the city’s detriment—driven by grassroots efforts” (p. 34). This is not a minor point. It matters a great deal because it reveals that human capital and charter school development have been top-down reforms rather than bottom-up initiatives. This is also significant because education entrepreneurs claim support and authority for their alleged innovations under the banner of “school choice.” By and large, however, communities in New Orleans have not “chosen” these reforms. Rather these reforms most often have been rammed through against their will. The racial politics of charter school advocacy are relevant here. Scott (2013) argues that advocates of market-based school reform, many of them white and wealthy, have embraced the discourse of racial uplift to legitimize their efforts, even as they lack organic grassroots connections to communities they seek to transform. With this in mind, consider one last prompt offered in the *Guide*: “To increase community engagement and local support of charter schools, educational organizations and the government must implement a plan for closing schools and choosing new school sites that includes the community early in the process” (p. 34). Note the fact that school closings are not up for debate. The community is merely invited to participate in a process already determined by “reformers” to be in their best interest.

Additional insight into these dynamics can be garnered from a review of NSNO’s 2008 operational plan, which predated the *Guide*. Under its advocacy objectives, specifically in relation to community leaders, the plan delineates the need to “map out which groups we need to build relationships with—both pro- and anti-charter” and “create a strategy to influence all unaligned organizations” (Childress, Bensen, & Tudryn, 2010, p. 408). Strategies premised on “influencing” community leaders rather than bringing them and their constituencies to the table to understand and build on *their* concerns, needs, and visions of education are not democratic. They are oppressive and make a mockery of genuine community engagement.

The experiences of the Lower 9 School Development Group (L9SDG) are relevant on this account. Recall that L9SDG was organized to press the RSD and school facility master planners to fund and rebuild this historic neighborhood’s only high school, which was destroyed in 2005. Under the School Facilities Master Plan, nearly 60 schools were “landbanked,” meaning they were closed indefinitely with buildings subjected to sale for alternative public or private use (RSD & New Orleans Public Schools [NOPS], 2008).

Under the master plan, three of the five schools that existed in the Lower 9th Ward prior to 2005 have either been demolished or are slated for demolition, and a fourth has been indefinitely closed (RSD & NOPS, 2008). Meanwhile, the RSD has received millions from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for damage to these schools. This money was not allocated to rebuild schools in the Lower 9th Ward, but instead was put in a general fund to support school construction in largely white neighborhoods uptown—all of this despite the fact that the vast majority of students in the city’s public schools are African American and live downtown. Most of the renovated and newly built spaces would be given to privately managed charter schools (Buras, 2011b, 2014; see also Baker, 2011).

One member of L9SDG questioned, “Who made a decision that we didn’t want a school back in this area? To take my money and place it in some arbitrary fund and say we’re going to do whatever we want to do—I think that’s criminal.” Among its many

actions, L9SDG collected petitions from families in support of building a new high school. It also wrote to Congress requesting a federal investigation of the use of public monies by the RSD, urging:

We have endeavored to work in tandem with local and state school officials, but it has proven to be to our community's detriment. After five years of trying to rebuild schools and other essential infrastructure in our neighborhood, we feel that we have exhausted our options. (L9SDG, 2010)

Through its own efforts, L9SDG commissioned architectural plans for a high school where the former high school once stood. In 2010, the group sponsored a billboard demanding RSD funding. It read, "Lower 9th Ward Stakeholders Ask...Where's the Money?" Prompted by the group's ongoing activism, RSD officials in 2011 committed to building a high school (L9SDG, 2011; see also Buras, 2011a). Nonetheless, the inequitable dynamics surrounding top-down decisions about where to build schools and who ultimately will teach in and lead those schools continue to propel reform in New Orleans.

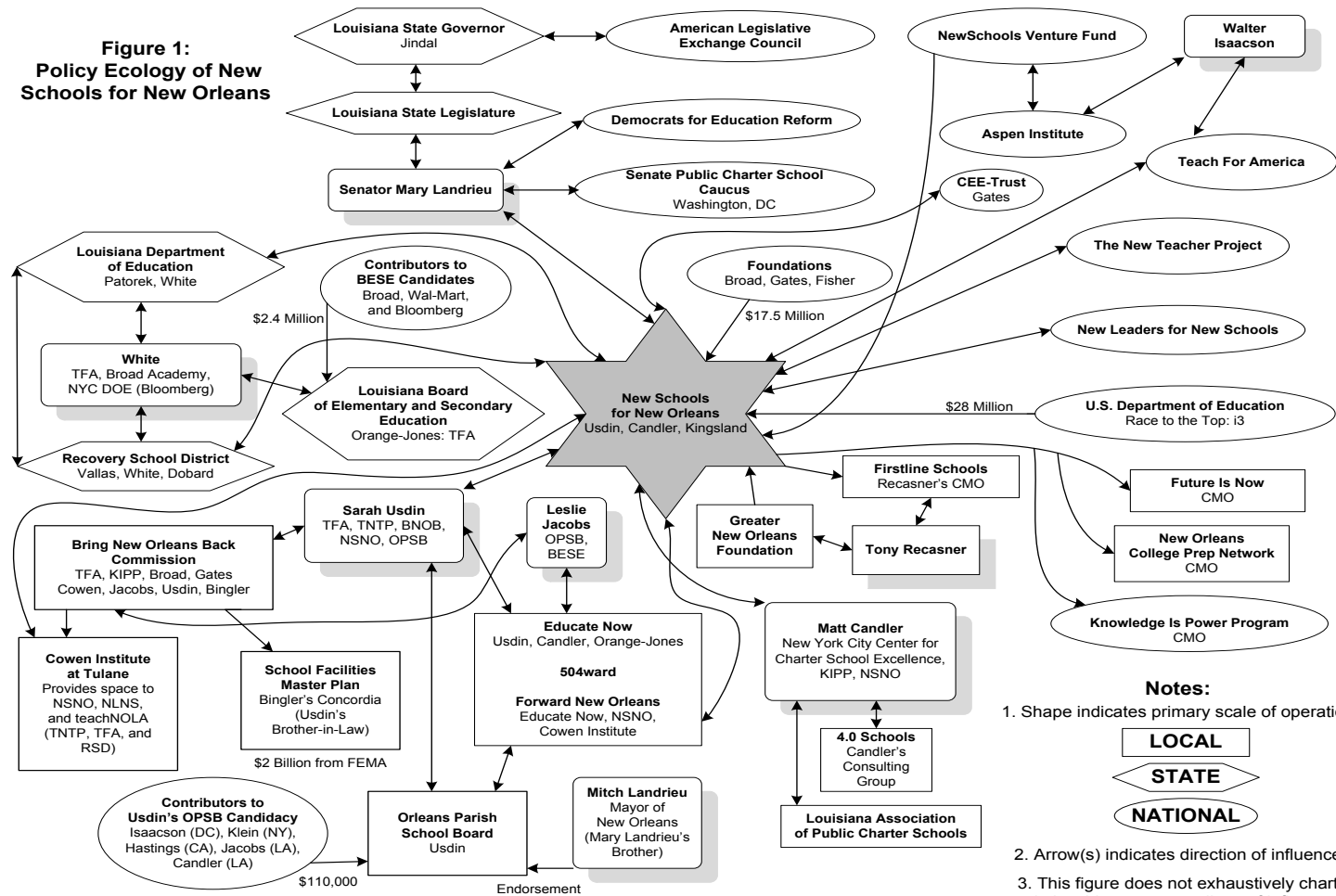
### **New Schools for New Orleans and a Growing Policy Network**

If NSNO did not consult longstanding community-based groups, then who exactly was consulted regarding the "lessons" to be learned from New Orleans-style reform? The *Guide* provides a partial map of the elite policy network that has shaped human capital and charter school development in the city, with NSNO playing a central role. In closing, a sketch of this network or *policy ecology* is offered to render more transparent the self-serving and accumulative interests behind the New Orleans model. According to Weaver-Hightower (2008), policy ecology "consists of the policy itself along with all of the other texts, histories, peoples, places, groups, traditions, economic and political conditions, institutions, and relationships that affect it or that it affects" (p. 155; see also Ball & Junemann, 2012). The *Guide* offers a glimpse into the people, institutions, and relationships supporting current reforms and reveals why our children were barely mentioned by NSNO, while words such as *human capital*, *labor costs*, *operating margins*, *market share*, *management*, and *portfolio* are used to describe the public schools in black working-class communities (Brinson et al., 2012). Close analysis of network relationships is revealing. A visual map is provided (Figure 1) to assist in following complex interactions.

Usdin's work in education began in 1992 as a fifth-grade teacher in East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she taught for three years through TFA. From 1995–2000, she served as TFA's executive director in Louisiana, and from 2000–2005 she acted as partner for TNTP (Usdin, 2012). TFA and TNTP have played crucial organizational roles in promoting alternative teacher recruitment, while blaming veteran teachers and teacher unions for urban school failure.

In March 2006—just six months after the storm—Usdin founded NSNO, a human capital and charter school incubator. NSNO initially received \$500,000 in seed money from the Greater New Orleans Foundation, which connects philanthropic donors with local organizations (Childress et al., 2010, p. 386). Anthony Recasner, a member of the

**Figure 1:  
Policy Ecology of New  
Schools for New Orleans**



foundation's board, would receive support from NSNO for charter schools he cofounded and operated through the CMO Firstline Schools, illustrating a tight-knit circuit of power (Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2012; NSNO, 2012a). As Usdin's preexisting affiliations suggest, NSNO's founding and funding were not an accident, but were made possible by her and others' involvement in an elite policy network that stretches far beyond New Orleans.

Within weeks of the storm, Usdin rode in a National Guard helicopter alongside Walter Isaacson, a native New Orleanian, president of the Aspen Institute (a think tank in Washington, DC) and chair of TFA's board at the time, to survey the city's destruction (Isaacson, 2007). Not only would the Aspen Institute become a hub for actors in a wider policy network supporting NSNO, but related philanthropies would provide the financial resources. Isaacson (2007) explains:

[Usdin's] work was supported by the NewSchools Venture Fund, a philanthropic investment fund started by two venture capitalists and Kim Smith, who launched it as her project when she had a fellowship at the Aspen Institution...For the past three summers, fund members have convened a meeting in Aspen of educational entrepreneurs, and at the July 2006 gathering, they decided to make New Orleans a focus of their involvement. (para. 5)

NSNO received funding from NewSchools Venture Fund as well as the attention, human resources, and capital of education entrepreneurs throughout this policy network. Isaacson continues: "The attendees decided that they needed a 'harbor master' in New Orleans, someone who could coordinate the various organizations, funders, and school operators. So one of the group, Matt Candler, was recruited to become [Usdin's] chief executive officer at [NSNO]" (para. 6). Indeed, Usdin reports, "There were many national players trying to figure out what to do, but there was not a logical place for them to go" (Childress et al., 2010, p. 386). NSNO would become a conduit for their influence.

To understand the interpenetration of local, state, and national networks, consider Candler for a moment. Prior to becoming NSNO's CEO, Candler worked for the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence and, even earlier, acted as vice president of school development for the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a nationally recognized CMO that would develop a network of schools in New Orleans, many of which received funding from NSNO (Childress et al., 2010). Within several years, Candler would develop his own consulting group in New Orleans called 4.0 Schools (2012), and also serve as chair of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, which NSNO's *Guide* says has been "instrumental in eliminating the charter cap, maintaining supportive finance laws, and generally protecting charter autonomy" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 22).

By December 2007, Usdin and staff "fielded countless congratulatory phone calls from education reform leaders around the country" (Childress et al., 2010, p. 384). The Eli and Edythe Broad, Bill and Melinda Gates, and Doris and Donald Fisher Foundations had jointly awarded \$17.5 million to NSNO, TFA, and NLNS to collaborate in recruiting new teachers and principals and opening new charter schools in New Orleans (Maxwell, 2007). These national foundations—all created and financed by wealthy venture capitalists—clearly grasped that New Orleans was a malleable and opportune place for



implementing the market-based visions of education that have guided their investments, especially in the disaster-generated vacuum of 2005 (see Saltman, 2010 for more on Broad).

When the *Guide* acknowledges some of “the following people for sharing their time and insights,” the list includes: a cofounder of the CMO Firstline Schools; the executive director of KIPP New Orleans Schools; the partner of NewSchools Venture Fund; and the executive director of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, Caroline Roemer Shirley. The report’s external reviewers are also positively acknowledged, including Candler of 4.0 Schools, the director of the Broad Foundation, and the chief program officer of the Fisher Foundation (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 3). TFA and TNTP are mentioned throughout the *Guide* for their efforts in New Orleans.

Much of NSNO’s early funding was based on its 2008 operational plan. In the plan, Usdin stated, “We reaffirmed our three focus areas—launching and supporting charter schools, attracting and preparing talent to teach and lead, and advocating for high-quality public schools—and set clear objectives for each” (Childress et al., 2010, p. 390). NSNO’s advocacy objectives focused on building relationships with the Louisiana State Legislature, Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and the state-run RSD. A few illustrations will demonstrate how state officials have embraced charter school reform to NSNO’s benefit (see also Buras 2011b, 2012a).

Senator Landrieu and her colleagues have played a major role in providing the legislative infrastructure necessary for the proliferation of charter schools in New Orleans. In the wake of Katrina, Landrieu became a darling of Democrats for Education Reform (2010), a political action committee with a market-based agenda nearly indistinguishable from Republicans. Her touting of the *Guide* in Washington, DC is emblematic of her ongoing legislative work. John White, former RSD superintendent and now state superintendent of education in Louisiana, has been a big supporter of charter school expansion. White is a former TFA teacher and a graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy, and he was deputy chancellor for the New York City Department of Education under Michael Bloomberg, who closed public schools and replaced them with charters (Cunningham-Cook, 2012; Simon, 2012). Much like NSNO’s ascendancy in New Orleans, White’s climb up Louisiana’s political ladder was not by chance. A number of now familiar billionaires, such as Eli Broad, Wal-Mart heiress Carrie Walton Penner, and Michael Bloomberg, contributed \$2.4 million to support the campaigns of market-oriented candidates to BESE. By comparison, teacher union-endorsed candidates had only \$200,000. BESE must approve the governor’s nominee for state superintendent of education and the state superintendent plays a role in deciding which charter schools can operate in Louisiana (Cunningham-Cook, 2012). Ensuring White’s approval by a like-minded state education board was essential. Not surprisingly, White and Paul Pastorek, the state superintendent previous to White, are acknowledged in the *Guide*, and Pastorek was appointed to the board of the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 3; Broad, 2012b).

One of the above BESE candidates, Kira Orange Jones, is executive director of TFA for Louisiana, the position that Usdin once held and was bankrolled with a campaign budget of more than \$472,000 compared to a meager budget of less than \$14,000 for the

teacher union-endorsed candidate (Cunningham-Cook, 2012). A recent ethics investigation surrounding Orange Jones' seat on BESE revolved around a potential conflict of interest, since she simultaneously heads TFA in Louisiana and sits on a state board responsible for approving million-dollar contracts with TFA (Adelson, 2012).

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal is also a part of this policy network. Jindal advocated and signed anti-teacher union, pro-charter school legislation that is perhaps the most radical in the nation (Barrow, 2012a, 2012b), creating a hospitable operating environment for NSNO. Jindal received an award from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a corporate front group that drafts model legislation for states. ALEC, which met in New Orleans in 2011, has had a startling influence on Louisiana's legislation (Center for Media and Democracy, 2012; Pocan, 2011; Underwood & Mead, 2012).

Locally, the Education Committee of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), which formed after the storm, has similar players. Its landmark report advocated the nation's first charter school district and touted the consultation of "top education experts," including Wendy Kopp, founder of TFA; Mike Feinberg, founder of KIPP; and Usdin. The Broad and Gates Foundations were also consulted. Usdin's brother-in-law, Steven Bingler, owner of Concordia architects, sat on the stakeholder advisory committee (BNOB, 2006). Concordia later emerged as one of the only two consulting firms that helped develop New Orleans' School Facilities Master Plan. It determined which schools would remain open, be closed, or be rebuilt. Ultimately, the plan was backed by almost \$2 billion (billion, not million) from FEMA, a settlement partly negotiated by Landrieu (Chang, 2010a). The Usdin-Bingler connection is important because most charter schools in New Orleans are recruited by Usdin and are given free access to facilities that Bingler helped shutter, renovate, or build.

Perhaps most revealing was the membership of the BNOB Education Committee. It included Tulane University President Scott Cowen, who headed the BNOB, and Leslie Jacobs, a wealthy New Orleans businesswoman whose role in charter school advocacy cannot be overstated (see below) (BNOB, 2006). The Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, an action-oriented think tank at Tulane, provides free room and board to NSNO, NLNS, and teachNOLA (Buras, 2011b). Landrieu's brother, Mitch Landrieu, is mayor of New Orleans and endorsed Usdin during her school board campaign (Vanacore, 2012a).

Jacobs is a case study of policy networking. An insurance executive and member of the Orleans Parish School Board, her family's company sold insurance to the school district. She also sat on BESE and had a hand in shaping legislation that created the RSD. Since 2005, Jacobs has used her political influence to push charter schools and alternative teacher recruitment (New Orleans Independent Media Center, 2009). She developed *Educate Now* (2012), an advocacy group focused on market-based education reform in New Orleans. Its advisory board includes Usdin, Candler, Orange Jones, and Roemer Shirley as well as associates from the Cowen Institute. Jacobs likewise founded *504ward* (504 is New Orleans' area code). *504ward* (2012) provides social networking opportunities for "new talent" in the city, with the goal of retaining young entrepreneurial newcomers. The synergy with NSNO is obvious enough and it continues to build.

Usdin stepped down as NSNO's CEO in order to run for a seat on Orleans Parish

School Board in November 2012 (Vanacore, 2012b). A group calling itself *Forward New Orleans for Public Schools*, which has Jacob's imprint, asked candidates in the election to sign-on to its guiding principles (Forward New Orleans, 2012). There is growing recognition by education entrepreneurs that the state-run RSD will need to return schools to governance by the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board, and thus a board guided by principles of charter school autonomy and development is priority one. Organizations endorsed Forward New Orleans include NSNO, Educate Now, and Cowen Institute, among others (Forward New Orleans, 2012).

The financing of Usdin's race for school board in November 2012 reflected network relationships. Usdin raised \$110,000, an amount unheard of in local school board campaigns (Vanacore, 2012b). Campaign finance reports from the state reveal noteworthy contributors, including Candler; Jacobs and her husband; and Jacobs' brother Stephen Rosenthal, who is chair of NSNO's board; Isaacson; former New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein; and Reed Hastings of Netflix (Louisiana Ethics Administration Program, 2012).<sup>3</sup> By comparison, Karran Harper Royal, a public school parent and community-based education activist running for school board, registered \$5,569 (Vanacore, 2012b). The local paper writes, "The list of contributors for Usdin stands as another testament to the national spotlight that has shined on New Orleans since the city began its controversial experiment with a system of autonomous charter schools" (Vanacore, 2012b, para. 6). It should come as little surprise that Jacobs and her brother are among the luminaries thanked in the *Guide* (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 3).

Aside from venture philanthropies, NSNO's other major funding stream is the federal Investing in Innovation program (i3), a component of Race to the Top. In 2010, NSNO received a \$28 million grant to turn around schools in New Orleans and to extend its work to Memphis and Nashville; this was topped by \$5.6 million in private funds, totaling \$33.6 million (Brinson et al., 2012; Chang, 2010b). In fact, the *Guide* was written "to meet the Investing in Innovation (i3) requirement that grantees disseminate the lessons of their work" (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 9). The collaboration with Memphis and Nashville follows from Landrieu's affiliation with Senator Alexander from Tennessee, who co-chairs the Senate Public Charter School Caucus with her. In addition, NSNO has reached out to education entrepreneurs and policymakers in Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Seattle, and elsewhere, and participated on a panel in New Orleans for the Council of Chief State School Officers, which includes state and district superintendents from across the nation (NSNO, 2012b).

In a recent interview, Kingsland explained the following about the significance of this policy network:

At the end of the day, we are morally accountable to the students of New Orleans and that's what motivates our staff. More practically speaking, we're accountable to where we get money from. That's the only reason we operate, is because other

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<sup>3</sup> Reed Hastings, founder of Netflix and former board member of Microsoft, is also the cofounder and CEO of Rocketship Education, a national CMO that relies heavily on computer-based instruction. Rocketship submitted an application in 2011 to operate eight charter schools in New Orleans and East Baton Rouge (Rocketship, 2011).

folks invest in us...So, just like anybody else we have to prove our worth and every couple of years we have to go back to the folks who have invested in us and show them results for them to continue investing. (Hess, 2012, p. 3)

This raises questions about whose interests matter most. When it comes to competing loyalties—one ethical and the other monetary—the danger is that financiers win out, especially when they are the “only reason” for NSNO’s ongoing operation. It is clear who was consulted for the *Guide*: venture philanthropists, education entrepreneurs, and state allies. Kingsland’s claim that reforms in New Orleans “empower parents and educators” falls flat. He who pays holds sway.

NSNO is a member of Cities for Education Entrepreneurship Trust (CEE-Trust), an undertaking to create the “ecosystem” necessary for charter school incubation and related reforms (Gray, Ableidinger, & Barrett, 2012). CEE-Trust is funded by the Gates Foundation, and policy partners include Mind Trust (CEE-Trust’s founder), Center for Reinventing Public Education, and Fordham Institute—think tanks that authored the reports on New Orleans mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Along these same lines, the *Guide* states that its purpose is to “aid others’ efforts to build on New Orleans’ success by providing tools and resources to guide their initial thinking, early work, and longer-term planning” (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 9).

We are concerned that this work, both in the short- and long-term, will continue to be guided by entrepreneurial interests, undermining what should be a process of democratic decision-making that includes working-class communities of color at the center of urban school reform. From its beginnings, the New Orleans model has been a means for dispossessing black teachers, students, and families of public education resources (Buras, 2005, 2007, 2009; Buras et al., 2010). This model has enabled human capital and charter school development to proceed by undermining veteran educators and the teacher union, installing inexperienced staff from outside the community, and advancing the interests of charter school operators at the expense of the children they claim to serve (Buras, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b). The voices of community members have been marginalized and ignored, even as they continue to be raised in opposition (Buras, 2012a, 2014; Buras, Dixon, & Jeffers, 2014). It is time to recognize that the New Orleans model is a guide for white education entrepreneurs (and select allies of color) to racially reconstruct the city, including its schools, for their profit (Buras, 2013a, 2014).

Yet a different model is possible. We suggest that there are democratic and collective principles to guide reform of schools in New Orleans and other cities. These include ensuring public schools that are:

- *neighborhood-based*, supporting the restoration and rebuilding of racially and economically oppressed communities along lines that are self-determined and inclusive;
- *open access*, without either formal or informal barriers to student enrollment and retention;
- *respectful of the contributions, rights, and benefits of veteran teachers* who have been subjected to the loss of assets accrued through decades of public service;
- *prepared to recognize the teacher union* in collectively representing the interests

- of veteran educators;
- *welcoming of substantive and democratic participation of grassroots communities in educational decision-making*, including plans for building and governing schools throughout the city; and
- *born from governmental transparency and accountability* in the allocation and use of public monies based on legitimate, sustained, and widespread community input. (Buras, 2011b)

We hope the lessons that we have learned allow working-class communities of color to challenge expansion of the New Orleans model to other cities. In the meantime, grassroots resistance continues to build in New Orleans.

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*Postscript:*  
**New Orleans Students Protest for Quality Education  
 and the Right to Fairness and Dignity**  
 Adrienne D. Dixon,<sup>a</sup> Ashana Bigard,<sup>b</sup>  
 and Walter Cohen High School Students

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Since October 4, 2012, students at the historic Walter Cohen High School in New Orleans have been fighting against plans made without their input or consent. Future Is Now (FIN), a charter management organization (CMO) supported by New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), entered into a contract with the Recovery School District (RSD) to manage Cohen until its closure in 2014. Currently operating on Cohen's second and third floors is the charter high school Cohen College Prep High, which is likewise supported by NSNO and part of the New Orleans College Prep network (NSNO, 2012). It will eventually replace Cohen. On October 4th, students were called into an assembly and informed of the management contract with FIN. Some of the juniors and seniors openly wept.

On October 5th, juniors and seniors promptly arrived to school at 8:00 in the morning. However, they refused to enter the school building and assembled for protest from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Parents and community members supported them by contacting community groups and media outlets and posting information on Facebook and Twitter. Since students had not eaten breakfast, parents also pooled resources and purchased pizza for lunch.

Several parents and community members at the protest reported that Ben Kleban, leader of New Orleans College Prep network, called police to stop what he wrongly perceived to be a violent uprising by students. Although students were peaceful, two police cars circled the school and finally parked a few feet from the building to monitor the protest from their vehicles. RSD officials came and asked students to re-enter the building, but they refused. At 1:30pm, students had an opportunity to speak to RSD superintendent Patrick Dobard. They asked several questions about his decision-making process and then presented a list of demands. Among the demands were:

- Students cannot be bought and sold. [Our] opinions should have been considered, and [decisions] not done behind closed doors. Cohen students and parents demand real "CHOICE" to determine the governance of the school. Any previous decisions made determining the governance of Cohen should be reversed and required to go through a parent/student/teacher/administrator committee;
- ALL teachers and administrators must be retained. Any faculty member fired from school year 2012–2013 must be reinstated. We need written documentation demonstrating why any faculty members were dismissed. We need written

documentation of any reprimands of faculty members. In the future, if a faculty member is to be dismissed, written documentation and a plan must be created and followed. ALL teachers and administrators must be fully certified by the state of Louisiana (which must be documented online at [www.TeachLouisiana.net](http://www.TeachLouisiana.net)). Out-of-state certifications are acceptable; and

- This type of hostile takeover did not just begin with Cohen—it has been going on since after Katrina. (Walter Cohen High School Students, 2012)

In other words, students demanded to participate in the decisions surrounding their school's governance and future, including the retention of existing veteran teachers and the guarantee that only certified teachers would be hired in their stead.

Dobard informed students that the decision had been made with their best interests in mind and that he would meet with them and their parents on October 8th. It was clear that students and parents had a very different understanding of their best interests.

On October 8th, the protest continued; students arrived at school at 7:30 in the morning and edited their written demands. They also held a press conference, but only the local media showed up despite calls to national outlets (Morris, 2012). At 5:30 pm, the RSD held a meeting for parents to explain that FIN would take over Cohen until its closure. Most of the students stayed for the meeting as well. By this time, students had been standing and protesting for nearly 12 hours, evidence of their strong opposition to current reforms.

On October 9th, Dobard threatened to call truancy officers if students continued to protest outside the school. Several reports by local news agencies, RSD, and FIN mischaracterized the students' return to school and suggested the protest was over. This was far from the truth. Because students, parents, and community members were concerned about students being criminalized and potentially arrested for truancy, they reluctantly returned to school.

On October 10th, after they had attended a full day of school, Cohen students joined students from L. B. Landry High School, which had similar concerns about its future, and marched together to RSD headquarters. They wanted a response to the demands they gave to Dobard on October 8th. They protested for more than two hours in the balmy heat of New Orleans (Harden, 2012; New Orleans Tribune, 2012).

This struggle exposes serious and ongoing concerns about human capital and charter school development in New Orleans. The students of Cohen, Landry, and other historically black high schools in New Orleans facing similar circumstances:

...want transparency and help showing how education reform has become an industry that has made some people rich at their expense. A lot of money has come to New Orleans for education reform but none of it benefits the children of New Orleans. People are making a lot of money on the backs of poor Black children in New Orleans. We want resources for our schools. We do not want to line the pockets of [other] people. (Students of Walter L. Cohen et al., 2012)

They are “sick and tired of being used, discriminated against, mistreated, put out of school, arrested, disrespected, silenced, and undereducated” (Students of Walter L. Cohen et al., 2012). They do not want the so-called innovations of education

entrepreneurs and billionaire philanthropists. They want the power and the resources to determine their own destinies (see also Buras, 2012).

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