



The Promising Launch of Community-Oriented Charter Schools in New Orleans

Brian R. Beabout, University of New Orleans
Joseph L. Boselovic, Johns Hopkins University

Few cities have adopted charter schools more rapidly than New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Although the Orleans Parish School Board still operates a few traditional public schools as well as its own charter schools, the Recovery School District run by the state has just become the first district in the country to have only charter schools. Many scholars regard New Orleans as an important site for studying many kinds of educational reforms, and we have done our own study of two community-oriented charter schools that opened in 2010 and 2013.

Although many existing New Orleans charter schools have been run by local or national non-profit organizations that emphasize the delivery of college preparatory instruction to mostly poor, non-white students, the two schools we studied were founded by parents and community members who are intensely engaged and have strong visions about the role of their schools in the community. These parents and community members have endeavored to build schools that foster cross-group friendships, serve as hubs for the surrounding neighborhood, and combine strong academics with a broad curriculum. This approach differs from the usual tendency of urban charter schools to define success narrowly in terms of student achievement on tests. Our study of these two grassroots charter schools offers important lessons for reformers well beyond New Orleans who believe in a more community-based approach to school improvement.

New Strategies for School Improvement and Community Change

To understand how these unique schools came about, we sought answers to a few important questions:

- Who were the parents and community members that pushed for the creation of these new schools? Why did these individuals get involved and stay committed, and what obstacles did they face?
- As these community groups worked to win charters and open schools, what did community engagement actually look like? What practices were used to build constituencies?

The preliminary answers must be understood within the context of the significant shifts in the educational landscape in New Orleans following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the aftermath of that catastrophe, the city's population has become about one-fifth smaller and somewhat wealthier and whiter, although the majority of residents are still African Americans. In a blow to the black middle class, nearly 7000 school system employees were laid off after the storm; and financial pressures have made it harder for low-income urban families to afford private schools. Although all families are interested in improving the city's public schools, their diverse backgrounds and means lead to varied expectations about how schools should operate and what they should aim to accomplish.

The distinctive context of post-Katrina New Orleans has created openings for leaders and community groups to organize and run their own schools. Committed individuals, interpersonal connections, and community ties have all played a role in school reform efforts. Our study provides findings about these early phases of these community-oriented reform efforts:

- Although some of the individual founders of these schools were parents or future parents, other community members also invested their time in order to improve their neighborhoods and connect with neighbors. After attending meetings to organize and plan for the new schools, many individuals felt a sense of accomplishment and collective efficacy that kept them engaged despite the many challenges they faced.

- Individuals who got involved early realized that their needs were fundamentally connected to the needs of their neighbors. Other good school options were seen as lacking, and reformers developed a growing conviction of the importance of engaging many community members prior to the opening of the new schools. Getting large numbers of committed citizens involved helped early proponents make up for what they lacked in terms of financial resources and prior experience with educational institutions.
- Well-organized groups knit together around individual needs and perspectives allowed each of these school projects to develop the leadership capacity and political capital necessary for successful charter applications and openings. By bringing together individuals with a variety of skills, resources, and needs, these groups were able to endure many challenges and generate significant investments from diverse participants.

Implications for Reform in New Orleans and Beyond

The early experiences of both of these schools provide encouragement for families and urban areas looking for more community-oriented approaches to school reform, but there is much we still do not know. The true success of these schools will be measured both by the academic performance of their students and by the persistence and enrichment of ties between school leaders and surrounding communities. The goals of these charter schools include but go beyond improving student test scores and rates of college admission. They aim to sustain engagement from the two economically and racially diverse neighborhoods that supported their founding – and also seek to spark neighborhood and urban changes well beyond school building walls. Community development as well as student success is the mission at hand.

Although the full stories remain to be told, the New Orleans schools we studied are involved in a larger movement spearheaded, in part, by the National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools. As part of this national initiative, these two efforts in progressive educational reform show that schools may both benefit from and propel neighborhood revitalization. Community-oriented charter school reforms show that positive changes for students and neighborhoods are possible even when broader social and economic reforms that many consider vital are not yet in place.

Read more in Brian R. Beabout and Joseph L. Boselovic, “Urban Charter Schools Prioritizing Community Engagement,” in *The Power of Community Engagement for Educational Change*, edited by Michael P. Evans and Diana Hiatt-Michaels (Information Age Publishing, 2015).