



How Uneven Marketing of Schools in New Orleans is Turning Education into a Commodity

J. Celeste Lay, Tulane University of Louisiana

Almost all public schools in New Orleans are charter schools. Parents must choose a school, with no default options at neighborhood schools for those who do not choose. More than two-thirds of New Orleans schools were authorized by and loosely governed under the Recovery School District, created in 2003 to take over “failing” schools. The city is in the process of returning its public schools to the Orleans Parish School Board, but until 2017, the Orleans Parish School Board had chartered only 18 schools. A few schools were authorized by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and one school was chartered by the Louisiana legislature. Louisiana grades all public schools from A to F. In 2015-2016, 38% of all public schools in New Orleans were either D or F schools. Orleans Parish School Board and Board Elementary and Secondary Education schools are generally higher-performing, especially those that have selective admissions.

Because all parents must actively choose a school, information is critical for parents to be able to make wise choices. Charter schools must compete for enrollments and thus market themselves to parents in much the same way that other products are marketed to consumers. From October 2015 to March 2016, a Tulane honors student, Alison Reip, collected data related to public charter school marketing. Her analysis of marketing materials indicates problems with equity and highlights the larger problems with privatizing a public good.

How Charter Schools Advertise in New Orleans

Schools vary widely in how much they spend to attract enrollments. In the 2016 fiscal year, five Orleans Parish School Board schools did not budget for advertising and seven did not indicate any such spending. The remaining schools spent from \$1,738 to \$50,000. Research revealed that money to advertise schools was deployed in various ways:

- **Signs in the public transportation system** make sense in New Orleans, which has one of the highest proportions of citizens without access to a private vehicle. Examining bus stops along 22 out of 32 routes revealed that ads on transport were used by only one Orleans Parish School Board school in addition to Recovery District schools that are part of a particular charter network. The schools within a network may have resource advantages. Many schools advertised at bus stops had low grades of C, D, and F, and most signs appeared in low-to-middle income neighborhoods with high percentages of African American residents. Only two signs appeared in the most affluent and white parts of the city.
- **Local media** can reach broad audiences. Over a five-month period, however, no ads appeared in the newspaper of record, The Times Picayune, and only one ad appeared on its website. Similarly, neither of the two major African American outlets had ads for public schools. The largest alternative newspaper, The Gambit, had 69 ads, four-fifths from private schools.

- **Open houses** can feature multiple schools. In surveys, parents say that school visits are their most significant source of information beyond personal social networks. However, this research found that only 12% of Recovery School District schools held open houses that were announced on their websites or through paid media, compared to 59% of Orleans Parish School Board schools and 80% of Board of Elementary and Secondary Education schools. Most of these schools held a single open house, usually on a weekday.
- **Kindergarten fairs can showcase many schools.** The Parenting Center at Children’s Hospital hosted a kindergarten fair that primarily attracted white parents and featured public schools in the most affluent part of the city, including two of the three selective admission elementary schools. A fair hosted by the Urban League at the Louisiana Superdome included more than 80 percent of public schools and was attended by more African American and Latino parents than whites.
- **School websites** provide very little substantive information. They tended to showcase symbols, mottos, and photos of students. Nearly all schools also highlighted academics, but often through the use of buzz words, such as “success,” “achievement,” and “excellence.” Fewer than half included School Performance Scores or graduation rates.

Problems of Equity

The marketing choices schools make are understandable. Why highlight poor school performance scores? Why place ads in neighborhoods where a school usually attracts few students? Given the importance of test scores in the authorization of charter schools, why would such a school market to kids who are, statistically, less likely to do well on standardized tests?

Such business-like marketing practices exacerbate racial and economic disparities. In 2009, 87% of white public school students attended an Orleans Parish School Board or Board of Elementary and Secondary Education charter school compared to 18% of Black students. Two-thirds of students in Orleans Parish School Board schools and half of those in Board of Elementary and Secondary Education schools were very poor compared to nearly all the students in Recovery School District schools. Outreach restricted to selected areas widens such poverty gaps.

What Can Be Done?

Once the schools return to the Orleans Parish School Board, it should host its own school fair and all schools should be required to attend. In addition, charter authorizers should require schools to hold multiple, widely advertised open houses at varying times/days to accommodate working parents. Schools should be required to display educational outcomes and admissions criteria on all marketing materials and on their websites. And, finally, to enable monitoring of outreach activities, schools should be required to list advertising expenditures in their budgets and display them online.

Such reforms might alleviate certain “information asymmetries.” But, fundamentally, insufficient and skewed advertising practices are the result of a largely privatized school system. When public goods become commodities much like beer or cosmetics, institutional leaders are bound to treat them like private goods – and the “public” mission will get lost as schools see themselves at odds with one another. One of the most important roles that government plays is to prevent actors from using public goods for purposes that are at odds with the interests of the commons.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from the authors' ongoing project and "The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity." Institute on Race and Poverty. May 2010.