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**SUCCEED OR PERISH: THE STORY OF ONE CHARTER SCHOOL IN POST-  
KATRINA NEW ORLEANS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

August 29, 2005 is a date that will never be forgotten by residents of the Gulf Coast region. On that date, Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans. With the resulting failure of the levee system, Katrina flooded 80 percent of the city. Among Katrina's devastation was the almost literal "washing away" of the Orleans Parish School District. Federal and State lawmakers used the disaster as an opportunity to seize the district from local control and to use New Orleans as a "greenfield" for the privatization of public education via charter schools. It is within this context that residents of the New Orleans East Neighborhood came together to create and open the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS) in 2008. This case study seeks to explore the following questions: 1) How are school success and school failure defined in this context over time? 2) What are the experiences of teachers at this "failing" charter school? 3) How do teachers at this "failing" charter school describe their workload and pressures? 4) How can lessons from these teachers' experiences be used to impact education reform? Through the use of teacher narratives and media narratives, this study documents the story of the NOECS from its founding in 2008 until its end in 2013, and shares the experiences of the teachers who worked there.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Residents of New Orleans and the Gulf States refer to it simply as “The Storm.” Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005 and was one of the most destructive and costliest disasters in recent history. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed the destruction- over 80 percent of the city was flooded, an estimated 986 New Orleanians died, and the storm caused an estimated \$135 billion in damages across the Gulf Coast region (Plyer, 2014). New Orleans’ system of man-made levees, which were designed to protect the below sea-level city, had breached and water from Lake Pontchartrain and the Industrial Canal poured into the bowl-shaped city without restraint.

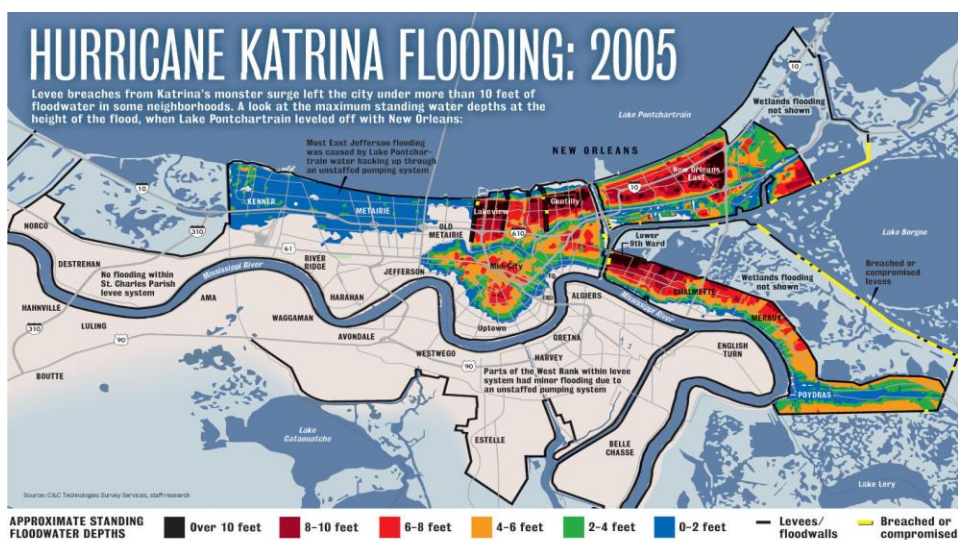


Figure 1-1. New Orleans Flood Level During Hurricane Katrina (Swenson, 2013).

Hurricane Katrina's impact on the Orleans Parish School District (OPSD), the public school system in New Orleans, was equally devastating- it displaced over 64,000 OPSD students, caused \$800 million in damages to OPSD school buildings, and left fewer than 20 (out of the 120 total) OPSD school buildings useable (Garda, 2010). Damages to New Orleans schools included "blown out or broken windows, water damage, roof damage, fallen ceiling tiles, and moisture and mold in ceilings and tiles (Johnson, 2008, p. 14)."

At the time, I had recently moved back to Houston, TX and I was working on completing my teacher certification. On the morning of August 28, 2005, the day before Hurricane Katrina hit, I received a phone call from my cousin in New Orleans. He informed me that some of he and some of our relatives were evacuating to Houston and asked if they could stay with us, the answer was a resounding "yes." The normally six-hour drive from New Orleans to Houston took them over 18 hours. As they had done with previous storms, my cousins brought very little with them as they assumed they would be returning home in a few days; but this time was different. We spent the next few days watching the CNN and witnessing the devastation that was occurring a mere 360 miles to the east. While grateful that everyone in our family had safely evacuated the city, my relatives had lost everything and their lives had been irrevocably changed.

### **Poverty and New Orleans' Vulnerable Population**

While my relatives had the means to safely evacuate, a segment of New Orleans' population-- the majority Black and poor-- were not so lucky and were not able to leave the city before it was flooded. Images such as mothers and children stuck on rooftops and highways surrounded by water, the deplorable conditions in the Superdome before and after the roof collapsed, and dead bodies floating in the flooded streets continue to remind us of Katrina's impact on those who were unable to evacuate and were left stranded in the city. Hurricane Katrina revealed to the world the racial and economic disparities in New Orleans. Johnson (2012) found that many of the poor residents in pre-Katrina New Orleans "earned less than \$8,000 per year, which was half of the federal poverty level of \$16,000 (p.14-15)." Pre-Katrina New Orleans was 68% Black and had an unemployment rate of 12 percent, which was over twice the national rate at the time (Holzer & Lerman, 2006). Holzer & Lerman (2006) found that 21% of residents in pre-Katrina New Orleans did not have access to a car and 8% did not have phone service, both being twice the national average (p. 7). These residents, who were mostly Black, did not have the means to evacuate and were "left behind" to fend for themselves and their families as Hurricane Katrina barreled towards New Orleans.

Zedlewski (2006) found that the groups hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina were "the elderly, people with physical and mental disabilities, and single mothers out of the job market (p.63)" which she collectively labels as "New Orleans' most vulnerable population [because] these groups had the highest poverty rates and

fewest assets (p.63).” To world witnessing this disaster, it was unfathomable that there could be such a level of poverty and despair in the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation.

### **Disaster Capitalism**

In Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath, Louisiana state lawmakers used the disaster to seize control of the Orleans Parish School District (OPSD) from the local school board while neoliberal reformers and conservative interest groups saw an opportunity to profit through the privatization of public education via charter schools. Think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise, Cato and Manhattan institutes lobbied for neoliberal reform policies and in November 2005, Governor Kathleen Blanco signed Act 35 which authorized the State takeover of 107 Orleans Parish public schools noting “it took the storm of a lifetime to create the opportunity of a lifetime (Garda, 2010, p.10)” as the State sought to radically transform New Orleans’ school system. Previous attempts by the State to take over, dissolve, or weaken the OPSB had failed because it was backed by the once powerful teacher’s union (United Teachers of New Orleans) along with the community, all of whom supported local control of schools. Now there was little opposition to Act 35 as Hurricane Katrina had displaced the local electorate. The primarily white lawmakers in Baton Rouge had successfully divested power from the local Black populace in New Orleans.

Because of its massive loss of schools, the bankrupt district fired almost

7,500 employees, 6000 of which were unionized teachers (Schwam-Baird, 2010, p.175-176). This basically destroyed the teacher's union which Garza (2010) viewed as a political move, noting the UTNO union as "one of the biggest and most powerful opponents of charter schools and state takeover measures (p.17)." One OPSD Principal commented, "One day you had a job and the next day you had no job...It felt as if the teachers became scapegoats for the schools' failings (Carr, 2013, p.61)." According to veteran teacher Ross

After Katrina I found myself, everybody was unemployed...they fired everybody...many of the schools were flooded so by necessity they fired us.

Veteran teacher Eric also recalled being laid off after Katrina

I got a letter from the school district...and it basically said the storm came, sorry we can't rehire you, we're firing you, and in a couple of weeks your insurance will be cancelled...It was just wrong.

In the "new" New Orleans, many charter schools refused to hire these veteran teachers. Instead, the Louisiana Board of Education (BESE) contracted with and relied on the Teach for America program to provide teachers for charter schools in New Orleans and in other parts of the state. This is clearly a "cost-saving" measure used by charter schools in that they prefer to hire less experienced, non-unionized teachers who work for a much lower salary than their more experienced counterparts. Under the charter system, teachers are considered "at-will" employees and work under one-year contracts. Most veteran teachers were critical

of this. Eric, an African-American teacher who had taught in New Orleans prior to Katrina commented

Before the storm [you had] job stability...[you were] part of a strong union...and [you knew] you could plan on staying where you were the next year.

This is an example of what Klein (2007) calls “disaster capitalism”, where areas hit by natural or man-made disasters become a source for corporate profit. Examples of “disaster capitalism” include: 1) the attacks on 9/11 which led to the of the military industrial complex through the “war on terror” (Perez & Canella, 2011, p.53), 2) the Asian tsunami of 2005 that allowed corporations to seize coveted shoreline properties for resort development (Saltman, 2007, p. 131), and 3) the privatization of public education in New Orleans after Katrina. In each of these instances, corporations were allowed to profit while radically transforming the social, economic, and political landscape of these communities with little or no input from the local populace.

Kristen Buras (2011) clearly describes how disaster capitalism impacted post-Katrina New Orleans

White entrepreneurs have seized control of a key asset in black communities—public schools—and through state assistance, charter school reform, and plans for reconstruction, have built a profitable and exclusionary educational system that threatens to reinforce rather than challenge the political economy of New Orleans. (p. 304)

As the 2014-2015 school year began, the New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) became the nation's first all-charter school district. The dominant discourse on post-Katrina education reform movement in New Orleans is based on two assertions: (1) the New Orleans public school system prior to Hurricane Katrina was not only "broken" but also corrupt and incapable of adequately educating its students, and (2) privatized education provided by charter schools were the answer to the city's educational problems (Miron, 2008). Akers (2012) critiques the impact of this

This narrative hands the possibility of transforming and rebuilding the city to those 'with the power and wealth' to do something immediately, while disempowering already existing communities and dismissing their ability to rebuild their neighborhoods and the city (p.36)

Using New Orleans as a model of "success and innovation," neoliberal reformers were pushing for increased privatization of education via charter schools in large urban areas such as Detroit and Philadelphia (Cowen Institute, 2013, p. 7).

Describing a recent study conducted by CREDO at Stanford University, the local Times-Picayune newspaper titled an article "New Orleans charter schools' academic growth superior, study says" and wrote "New Orleans charter schools show more academic growth than traditional public schools (Dreilinger, 2015)." One of the main issues is that the study does not differentiate between the many types of charter schools operating in New Orleans. OPSD charters are selective schools with admissions requirements, more white, and are thereby higher performing. RSD

charters are open enrollment, must accept all students, and are lower performing. Lumping the two together artificially inflates the performance of RSD charters.

A National Review article cited a recent study conducted by researchers at Tulane University, which concluded that education reforms in post-Katrina New Orleans “have produced enormous gains (Winters, 2015).” Winters (2015) believes that school reform, through privatization and charter schools, has “fundamentally improved the lives of poor urban kids” in New Orleans and calls for similar reform in other cities. Like others before him, Winters (2015) places blame for past failures on the “bloated, dysfunctional [public school] system” and conveniently ignores the deeper issues of race, class, and segregation that continue to be problematic in post-Katrina New Orleans.

This section discussed disaster capitalism as a means for private corporations to profit from natural or man-made disasters. In post-Katrina New Orleans neoliberal reformers successfully lobbied for the State takeover and privatization via chartering of 107 Orleans Parish public schools. In order to do so, the narrative was framed by neoliberal reformers and propagated through the media, that the OPSD was “failing” and that neoliberal principles such as “choice” and “accountability” would be the keys to fixing education in New Orleans.



## **Rebuilding**

In late 2005, most of my relatives decided to return to New Orleans to rebuild their homes and lives. One family evacuated to California and decided to stay there. The ones that decided to return did so because of their strong connection to the Vietnamese community in New Orleans and to the local Catholic Church. Seidman (2013) described the Vietnamese residents of the New Orleans East Community as “tight-knit, communitarian, and well-organized within its church-qualities that facilitated its repeated migrations and fast recovery after Katrina (p.153).”

Residents returning to the urban community of New Orleans East after Katrina were extremely dissatisfied with the length of time it was taking to rebuild and open the public schools in their area. There were two main reasons for this with one reason being that the Orleans Parish School District was bankrupt with over \$256 million in debt at the time and thus had difficulties rebuilding and reopening their schools (Garda, 2010, p.3). By January 31, 2006 the OPSD was only able to reopen 18 (out of 120) schools in the city (Johnson, 2008, p.16). The second reason was that the Bush administration sent more than 48 million dollars in federal grants in 2005-2006 to build charter schools in New Orleans with no money going to the public schools (Rasheed, 2007, p.7). Post-Katrina New Orleans had been transformed into a “laboratory for neoliberal free market policies (Johnson, 2012, p.19).”

It was under these circumstances that local community members, church leaders, and several professors from Tulane University and Loyola University formed a school board and opened the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS) with the goal of providing a free and quality education for the children of their community, which has been historically underserved. They sought to build a school that would become a “cornerstone” of the community and viewed the community’s diversity as a “great resource,” rather than a detriment. With this vision, the Board proceed to craft the school’s official mission statement

Our mission at NOECS is to create an excellent school for our community, one of academic rigor, great pride in the diverse cultures that make up home populations, and a passion for learning throughout life and for becoming creative, responsible, caring citizens. We seek to build on the community’s many strengths without shying away from tackling problems that threaten to distract or impede our children’s academic and social progress.

One of the conditions for state approval of the charter was that the school board hired a charter management company to run the school. The school board decided to hire Edison Learning, a for-profit company. According to the NOECS charter application, Edison would

Manage the school...[with] the authority and decision making responsibility for day-to-day implementation of the educational programs of the school, including but not limited to hiring and firing school staff

and designing the school's curriculum...Finance, accounting, budgeting, administrative, and other back-office services will also be provided by Edison (p.6)

This falls in line with the neoliberal goals to privatize and profit from the dismantling of public sectors and services such as education and health services. According to its charter application, the NOECS Board chose Edison because of their "strong record of academic growth across the country with a range of student populations (p.5)," and also because of its "proven success in communities around the country, particularly...schools with high percentages of at-risk students (p.11)." An NOECS Board member similarly summarized the hiring process

We did research and had [Edison] people come in to present their goals and their results from different schools that they had and [their] experience...and the schools that they did run were very similar to what we were running, and that's why we chose them.

In May 2008, as I was finishing up my second year as a substitute teacher I was informed about the opening of NOECS by my cousin who lived in the same neighborhood as the school. I quickly applied and interviewed for a teaching position and was offered a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade position at the end of June 2008. After a few days of reflecting and talking to family and friends I accepted the offer to teach at NOECS. It was because of this community's determination to rebuild, the school's mission and goals, as well as the opportunity to help open a new school from the ground-up that I moved to New Orleans to teach. The school opened in late August

2008, roughly 3 years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the community of New Orleans East. I taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at the school for four years (2008-2012). During my time at NOECS, the school encountered many successes along with many problems, and at the end of the 2012-2013 school year the school's charter was not renewed by the Louisiana state board of education (BESE) and the "failing" school was taken over by another charter operator which, at the times of this writing, continues to run it.

Witnessing this take-over raised questions about the overall impact and "success" of the charter school movement on post-Katrina New Orleans and its children for me. For example, 1) Why is the charter school movement in New Orleans viewed by neoliberals as a "model" for the rest of the nation when so many schools have taken over and/or closed down? 2) Why are some "failing" schools permitted to continue operating while others (like NOECS) have their charters revoked? and 3) What is the impact on communities, families, and faculty when traditional public schools are privatized?

## **Study**

Initially there was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm with the school's opening being that it was the community's efforts that created the new school. They were not waiting for the OPSD to reopen schools, they were being proactive. There was also a sense that this new school signified a new beginning for the community after Katrina. For example, a BusinessWire article published prior to the school's

opening stated

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of residents of the New Orleans East Neighborhood were stranded at the New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church. Now nearly three years later, those same residents will celebrate the opening of the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS) temporarily on the same site.

As the years went by, however, I began to notice that the school's image and the way it was portrayed in the local media turned more and more negative. In the early years, media narrative presented NOECS as "doing just fine (Carr, 2009)" and "on the right track (Carr, 2009)." From 2012 onward, the media narratives shifted and NOECS was consistently referred to as "failing (The Advocate, 2015)" and/or "failed (Dreilinger, 2013)." This was not what I was experiencing working there as a lot of the positive things we were doing at the school was largely being ignored. Based on conversations and observations, I also noticed that not all teachers were having positive experiences. Being labeled a "failing" school was an oversimplification of the complexities that were occurring, and I set out to investigate this conflict further through my dissertation research. To do this, I designed and conducted a case study of a single charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans, the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS). Through analysis of teacher narratives and text analysis of documents, this case study seeks to explore the following questions: 1) How are school success and school failure defined in this context over time? 2) What are the experiences of teachers at this "failing" charter

school? 3) How do teachers at this “failing” charter school describe their workload and pressures? 4) How can lessons from these teachers’ experiences be used to impact education reform?

### **Dissertation Overview**

Chapter 1 has presented the background and rationale for this study, along with my personal connections to it. Hurricane Katrina nearly washed New Orleans out of existence in 2005. Neoliberal reformers, state lawmakers in Baton Rouge, and federal lawmakers in Washington D.C. used this disaster to radically transform the public school system in New Orleans. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of public education in New Orleans. This will give us a better understanding of how the challenges and problems facing public schools and education in New Orleans are deeply-rooted and connected to the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and racism of the South. Chapter 3 traces the growth of the charter school movement in New Orleans and discusses its connections to neoliberal ideology. While Buras (2011) views the post-Katrina charter school movement in New Orleans as “a deadly assault on Black schools and neighborhoods (p.302),” Lipsitz (2006) views neoliberal ideology as a threat to American democracy (p.464). The first section of Chapter 4 discusses narrative research as the approach to data analysis I employed for this project. The second section of Chapter 4 discusses case study design, including the strengths and limitations of the approach. Throughout each section I include a discussion of how narrative research and case study informed the

decisions I made and the steps I followed throughout this project. Chapter 5 presents the findings of this project. The first part of the chapter presents the media narratives surrounding the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS). The second part of the chapter presents the teacher narratives from those who worked at NOECS. Chapter 6 discusses the implications of this narrative case study along with potential work in the future.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Public Education in New Orleans**

New Orleans was founded in 1718 as a French colony and Black slaves were brought in the following year from Africa. In 1724, the “Code Noir” laws were implemented which limited slaves’ education to only “reading and writing what was necessary for religious life” (Baker, 1996, p.15). During this period, free Blacks also known as “free people of color”, comprised of Creoles and also immigrants from the West Indies, namely Haiti, were afforded the same economic and legal rights as white citizens (Spain, 1979, p.84). New Orleans became Spanish territory in 1763 and was returned to France in 1800 before being sold to the United States in 1803.

As more white Americans began moving to New Orleans, those in power looked to stratify society along racial lines to cement their privileged position. Soon after the Louisiana Purchase, free Blacks lost the rights and privileges they had enjoyed under French and Spanish rule. A law was passed in 1816 to segregate the city along racial lines. As Spain (1979) notes

Nearly every conceivable facility in New Orleans [was segregated]:

theaters; the French Opera House; public exhibitions; hotels; Charity



Hospital; public schools; restaurants and saloons. Jails were segregated, with different uniforms for Blacks<sup>1</sup> and whites. Streetcars were segregated and cars for Blacks were marked with a star on all sides. (p.5)

In 1830, white legislatures passed the “Slave Code” law,

That all persons who shall teach, or permit or cause to be taught, any slave in this state, to read or write, shall, on conviction thereof, before any court of competent jurisdiction be imprisoned not less than one month nor more than twelve months. Acts of Jan. 4, 1830 of Ninth

Legislature of Louisiana, Mar. 16, 1830, 2nd Sess. Section 3, at 96 (1830)

This law made it a crime, punishable by imprisonment, to teach slaves to read or write as white legislatures viewed the education of slaves as a threat to their supremacy (Baker, 1996; Johnson, 2012).

## **1842-1896**

The first New Orleans public school opened in January 3, 1842 because of Joshua Baldwin. Baldwin, who was heavily influenced by Horace Mann, spent the prior year working to convince State Legislators to authorize the city to create a school system run by its own board of directors. It was during this time that

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<sup>1</sup> By this time white Americans saw little to no difference between free Blacks and Black slaves. In this section I use “Black” to include all peoples of color in New Orleans during this period such as Creoles, African slaves, African-Americans, immigrants from the West Indies, etc.

Louisiana lawmakers also passed legislation prohibiting free black and slaves from attending public schools (Baker, 1996).

Without access to public education during this period, the free Black community established its own secular and parochial schools (Baker, 1996) with the first private school for black children opening in 1847 (Lewis, p.175). Marie C. Couvent, a free African widow, left her fortune to create a school for Black children. The Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents opened in 1848 and received financial support from wealthy free blacks along with state funding on the account that it was seen as “only an orphanage” though in actuality it was a full-fledged school that created “a class of educated Blacks and black Creoles (Baker, 1996, p.16-17).” When local millionaire John McDonogh died in 1850, he left half of his fortune for the creation of “schools... wherein the poor of both sexes and all classes and castes of color, shall have admittance, free of expense...[to] receive a common English education” (Lewis, 2007, p.175).

While Blacks in New Orleans were denied access to public education up to this point in time, the results of the Civil War brought numerous changes to the city and its people. New Orleans surrendered to the Union in 1862 and faced 15 years of occupation by Union troops for the duration of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Union army occupying New Orleans, led by General Benjamin Butler, encouraged the public schools to reopen and also created a school system for freed slaves. For two years following the Civil War, separate public schools for whites and blacks were run in parallel (Johnson, 2012). In 1868, a new state constitutional

convention dominated by newly enfranchised Blacks and white Republicans adopted a constitution that required schools to be established on a common basis without segregation by race. Despite initial resistance to school integration, many integrated schools were able to operate smoothly from 1871-1874. With access to a desegregated public education Blacks were able to “make substantial gains [and] outperformed Whites on several measures” (Parsons & Turner, 2014, p.103) during this period. A number of new private schools opened during this period to take in white students whose parents refused to send their children to the newly integrated schools and as a result New Orleans public school enrollment dropped from 24,892 to 19,091 in 1871 (Baker 22).

As a result of the Compromise of 1877, Union troops were pulled out of Louisiana and control was returned to Southern Democrats who almost immediately passed a series of legislation to resegregate the state along racial lines. Thus, the end of Reconstruction led to the emergence of two separate school systems for students in New Orleans- white students were able to attend schools that were better funded, less crowded, and kept in better condition, while black students were left to attend schools that suffered from fewer resources and overcrowded classrooms (Johnson, 2012).

## 1896-1954

In 1890, the Louisiana legislature passed the “Street Car Act” which required white and Black passengers to ride in separate railroad cars (Baker, 2006, p.34). In 1892, Homer Plessy, a Creole resident of New Orleans, bought a first-class railroad ticket and was arrested when took his seat in the first-class railroad car which was reserved for whites. Plessy filed suit that the law violated the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments of the U.S. Constitution and the case was brought to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court found that Louisiana’s Street Car Act did not violate the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment which abolished slavery as the point “is too clear for argument” or 14<sup>th</sup> amendment which granted citizenship and equal protection of the laws,

So far, then, as a conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment is concerned, the case reduces itself to the question whether the statute of Louisiana is a reasonable regulation... In determining the question of reasonableness, it is at liberty to act with reference to the established usages, customs, and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their comfort and the preservation of the public peace and good order. Gauged by this standard, *we cannot say that a law which authorizes or even requires the separation of the two races in public conveyances is unreasonable* [emphasis added]. (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896)

The Supreme Court’s ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 “fortified the separate but equal tenet” (Lewis, 2007, p.177) and ushered in the era of “Jim Crow Segregation.” Lewis (2007) notes that this era, which lasted roughly 50 years up the

*Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, was marked with white “indifference or outright hostility to black education...[which] reduced both the quantity and quality of New Orleans' black public schools” (p.178-179).

One example of this hostility was the 1900-1910 school district policy of restricting black students to grades one through five. Some black students were able to attend middle school during this period but none had access to high school until the district opened McDonogh #35 in 1917 due to continued pressure from black citizens (Lewis, 2007).

The expansion of the city streetcar system during this period helped to further segregate the city. “With public transportation available, blacks began moving back toward the central business district...[while] whites could move farther out of the city and still be within reasonable commuting distance of the business district....The two opposite directions in which the races moved set the stage for the development of racial enclaves” (Spain, 1979, p.89). Many of these racial enclaves in the New Orleans area continue to exist today. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the population of New Orleans continues to be predominantly Black at 60%, which is down from 68% pre-Katrina; while the suburbs surrounding the city are predominantly white- 66% in Jefferson Parish, 84% in St. Tammany Parish, and 72% in St. Bernard Parish.

During the early to mid-1930's the NAACP began focusing on “education as the key to equality (Baker, 56, 2006)” and waged their first “battle” against unequal pay for black and white teachers. In 1941, A.P. Tureaud, a native New Orleanian

lawyer, filed suit against the Orleans Parish School Board seeking equal pay for black and white teachers. As Baker (2006) notes, during this time white public school teachers in New Orleans were paid \$1000 for their first year with yearly increases so that they would earn \$2600 in their tenth year while black public school teachers received a starting salary of \$909 for the first year and by the tenth year they would earn \$1380 (p.59). NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall came to New Orleans to help Tureaud with the case and in 1942 Federal District Judge Wayne Borah ruled that black teachers in New Orleans were “entitled to be paid on the same salary scale as white teachers” (Baker, 2006, p.63).

Later in the decade the NAACP waged their next “battle,” seeking equal access to educational opportunities for Blacks. Baker (2006) elaborates on the differences: During this period, “Louisiana was spending \$113.30 for each white student compared to \$34.06 for each black student...whites went to school 180 days, blacks 156.7... [there was] a 561 percent greater investment per white child in school property [higher than any other Southern state] (p.144)”. Black schools were poorly maintained, over-crowded, and utilized dated resources while white schools were well maintained, well-funded, and often had empty classrooms. In 1948 Tureaud filed suit against the Orleans Parish School Board for maintaining unequal and inferior “educational facilities” for black students, which violated the Fourteenth Amendment (Baker, 2006, 153-154).

By the time District Judge Herbert Christenberry gave permission for the case to continue in federal court two years later, the NAACP had decided to “make

an all-out fight against segregation and that there would be no attempt made for 'separate but equal' facilities for Negroes (Baker, 2006, p.157)." In 1952, Tureaud looked to challenge the legality of segregated public schools itself in *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board*, but the NAACP asked that Tureaud postpone the case until after the Brown decision.

### **1954-present**

The Supreme Court's ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954 reversed the *Plessy* ruling and signaled the legal end of Jim Crow segregation. The Court's decision was delivered by Chief Justice Earl Warren

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does... To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone... *We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal* [emphasis added]. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954)

The post-*Brown* Court ordered desegregation of public schools around the

country was met with massive resistance in the South. According to Spain (1979) “A poll taken after [the] ruling revealed that 82 percent of New Orleans parents would rather see the schools closed than desegregated (p.91)” and many sent their children to private schools to avoid integration. In response to the Brown decision, the Louisiana state legislature passed a series of laws attempting to keep its public schools segregated. Lewis (2007) describes three of these laws:

Act 556...permitted superintendents throughout Louisiana to assign students to a particular school...for separation of the races. Act 496...empowered the Governor to assume control of any school district under court order to desegregate. [Another law] prohibited the giving of funds and benefits to any desegregated school. (p.183)

The laws were ruled unconstitutional in 1956 and after a series of appeals, on May 16, 1960 Federal District Judge Skelley Wright ordered all public schools in New Orleans be desegregated for the new school year starting that September (Baker 2006).

On November 14, 1960, Ruby Bridges and three other black girls, under the protection of police and federal marshals, integrated the first white schools in the South since Reconstruction. On that day, Gail Etienne, Leona Tate, and Tessie Prevost desegregated John McDonogh Elementary, while Ruby Bridges alone desegregated William Frantz Elementary (Johnson, 2012). According to Johnson (2012) “the victory in this desegregation school case symbolized a crucial conquest for educational access and civil rights in New Orleans (p.13).”



Baker (2006) notes that 24 private schools opened across the city during this time resulting in a decrease of White enrollment in public schools- from 40,498 in 1959 to 38,112 in 1960, while Black enrollment rose from 49,121 to 52,581 during the same period (p.366). The plan to desegregate one grade per school year was seen as too slow- “by 1964-65, only 873 black students attended desegregated schools in what was now a majority black school system with over 100,000 students” (Baker, 1996, p.472).

As a result the NAACP went back to the courts and a federal judge ordered all public schools in New Orleans be officially desegregated through the twelfth grade by the 1969-70 school year. As black enrollment at formerly all-white public schools increased in the late 1960's, Lewis (2007) notes that there was not a corresponding increase in the “overall condition of black education...[as] busing would force the closure of a number of formerly racially segregated “black” schools...[the ones] that remained open would continue to struggle to meet students' basic curricular needs because of insufficient school supplies, inadequate teacher preparation, and increased apathy among both student and teacher populations” (p.185). As a result, when the public school system in New Orleans was declared completely desegregated in the late-1970's, it strongly resembled the system that existed prior to Brown (Lewis 2007). The start of “White flight” to the suburbs and/or nearby parishes in the late 1960's depleted the tax base for the Orleans Parish School District (OPSD) and made it difficult to fund and maintain public education for the next four-plus decades.

Before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, the dominant narrative portrayed the OPSD as one of the worst performing public school districts in the United States (Garda, 2010; Johnson, 2008). This was based solely on school and student “performance” and ignored the larger social, economic, and political conditions at the time. For the 2003-2004 school year 112 of the 127 (88%) schools in the OPSD were in danger of state takeover, 93 out of the 127 (73%) in the OPSD were considered “academically unacceptable” by the state, and 44 out of the 127 schools (35.0%) did not achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (Garda, 2010). In the 2004-2005 academic school year 44% of fourth graders in the OPSD tested proficient in reading and only 26% tested proficient in math. Of eighth grade students attending OPSD schools, 74% did not pass the basic skills test in the area of language arts, and 70% failed to demonstrate basic math skills (Johnson, 2008, p.12). According to Holley-Walker (2007), prior to Hurricane Katrina there was an average achievement gap of 51-points in English and 53-points in Math between Black and white students in New Orleans, which was twice as high compared to the rest of the state (p.6). Figure 2-1 was created using data from the Louisiana Department of Education and shows the performance of elementary schools in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina:

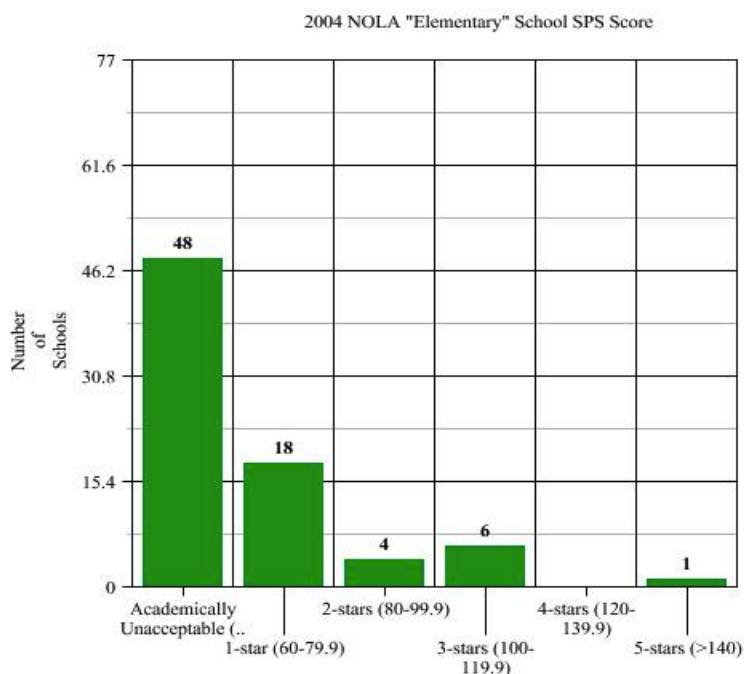


Figure 2-1. New Orleans School SPS Scores in 2004 (Louisiana Department of Education).

The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) runs the OPSD and is infamous for its pre-Katrina financial irresponsibility and corruption. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the district was officially bankrupt with over \$265 million in debt and “corruption had become so rampant that the FBI set up a task force housed in the district headquarters that led to dozens of criminal indictments” (Garda, 2010, p.3). The state auditor called the district a “train wreck” and detailed a list of abuses that included promotion policies that put people in jobs they were not qualified for as well as a district accounting office that did not have a single accountant employed. The state auditor estimated that the system was running a \$25 to \$30 million deficit, but couldn’t be certain because of the poor quality of the financial records. The U.S.

Department of Education found nearly \$70 million in federal money for low-income students either improperly accounted for or misspent (Garda, 2010). Schwam-Baird & Mogg (2010) argue that the main cause of corruption and ineptitude within the OPSD/OPSB was a lack of leadership, as evidenced by the district going through eight superintendents in the seven years leading up to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Dingerson (2006) believed that the underlying problem with the education system in New Orleans was a lack of a “middle-class constituency and its political support (p.8).” Most white families in New Orleans either sent their children to private schools or move to nearby parishes with better public schools. Many middle-class African-American families still live in Orleans Parish but send their children to Catholic schools.

Despite all its problems, the state and city could not take over, dissolve, or weaken the OPSB because it was backed by the once powerful teacher’s union (United Teachers of New Orleans) along with the community, all of whom supported local control of schools.

## **Conclusion**

History has shown that improving public education in New Orleans has been difficult because of the historically rooted social and political issues associated with race and class. The post-Plessy era of de jure segregation further strengthened the dual systems of public education in New Orleans. White schools were numerous and well-funded while black schools were under-funded and over-crowded. The post-Brown “white flight” led to an era of de facto segregation in New Orleans where

middle- and upper-class whites moved to the suburbs and/or nearby parishes, which drained the tax-base for the OPSD and left public schools in the city highly segregated and under-funded. The result is a continuation of the dual system of public education from the past where schools in the suburbs and nearby parishes have a student population that is majority white and are usually higher performing, while schools in the city have a student population that is majority black and are usually lower performing. The problem was compounded when middle- and upper-class black families began moving to the suburbs and/or nearby parishes so that their children could attend the higher performing schools. This left New Orleans with a population that was majority black (Figure 3-1), and poor (Figure 4-1), and along with an under-funded public school system, these become the largely undiscussed root-causes for the myriad of problems and challenges faced by the OPSD and its students prior to Hurricane Katrina.

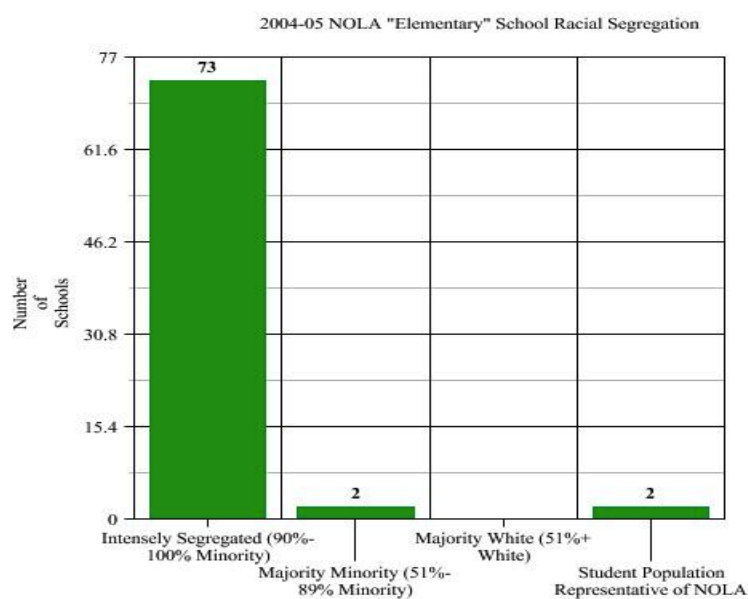


Figure 3-1. Racial Segregation of New Orleans Schools in 2004 (Louisiana Department of Education).

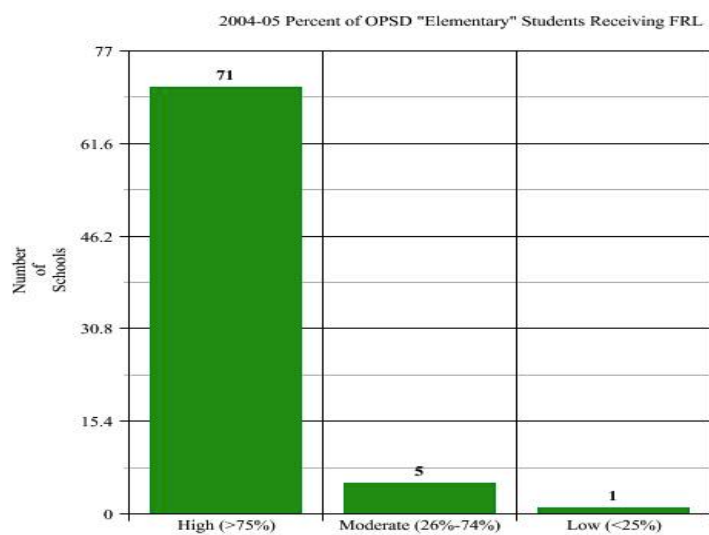


Figure 4-1. Poverty Levels as Measured by FRL Percentage at New Orleans Schools in 2004 (Louisiana Department of Education).

## Chapter 3

### Neoliberalism and the Charter School Movement

Neoliberal education reformers tend to push the narrative that charter schools came to New Orleans *after* Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in 2005 and successfully “transformed” the public school system that had been “broken” for many years.

In reality the charter school movement in Louisiana began in 1995, almost a full decade prior to Hurricane Katrina (Garda, 2011), and many of the issues and problems that plagued the old, “broken” public school system are still present today in the “new” New Orleans (Akers, 2012, p.37). This chapter will trace the growth of the charter school movement in New Orleans and discuss its connections to neoliberal ideology.

#### Charter Schools

As the legality and effectiveness of school voucher plans were being debated in the 1980's, conservatives began to gravitate towards charter schools as being the solution to education reform. Whereas school voucher plans for private schools only provided parents with “limited choice” of schools for their children, charter schools had the potential to offer parents with an “unlimited choice” of schools to which they could send their children. In 1991 Minnesota became the first state to authorize the use of public money to fund charter schools. According to the United States Department of Education, charter schools are “nonsectarian public schools of

choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to public schools (answers.ed.gov)". Bulkey & Fisler (2002) describe charter schools in a similar fashion, "Charter schools are relatively autonomous schools of choice that operate under a charter or contract...[which] provide school operators more autonomy than afforded a district-run public school in exchange for enhanced accountability by requiring schools to prove they are worthy of succeeding contracts (p.1)."

In theory, charter schools are able to be more innovative in educating students because they are freed from the rules and regulations of a centralized school district as well as from the demands of teachers' unions. Sizer & Wood (2008) note that in reality, charter schools' ability to be innovative is severely limited by their access to funding, the number of students they enroll, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Because they are schools of choice, charter schools must compete with one another for students as parents have the freedom to withdraw their children from poor performing schools and enroll them into higher performing ones. This is somewhat ironic as NCLB calls for the closure of "failing schools" and forces those students to attend charters, which then are also limited by NCLB and must compete with one another in order to stay open and profitable.



### **Pre-Katrina Accountability Reforms and Charter Schools in Louisiana**

While charter schools seemingly arrived overnight to post-Katrina New Orleans, it actually took almost a decade and required the passing of numerous legislative acts all of which cumulatively “paved the way” for charter schools to take over the educational landscape of New Orleans. Garda (2011) sees a direct link between the accountability movement in the United States and the rise in charter schools as both are founded upon the values of “choice, accountability, and autonomy (p.7).” In the midst of the school accountability movement of the 1990’s, Louisiana passed Act 192 in 1995, which permitted only local school boards to authorize charter schools. Because of pressure from teacher unions and the general public, only three charter schools opened in the entire state the following school year, none of which were located in New Orleans (Garda, 2010).

In 1997 Louisiana created the Louisiana School and District Accountability System (LSDAS) to set performance goals for schools, develop a report card system to inform the public about school performance, and called for corrective action for schools that failed to meet their targets (Garda, 2010). Also in 1997, the state passed Act 477, which revised Act 192. Act 477 allowed charter schools to be chartered for a five-year period, identified four types of charter schools (based on whether they were new schools or conversions of existing schools and their authorizing entity), and also identified circumstances in which charters could be revoked but did not identify the steps for the renewal of charters (Garda, 2010). In 2003, the state created a new “Type 5” category of charter schools, comprised of schools taken over

by the RSD; these charter schools unlike the previous four types, could not have admission requirements and were required to admit all students.

In order to meet the requirements set by NCLB in 2001, Louisiana amended the LSDAS with the Recovery School District Act (RSDA), which authorized the newly created and state run Recovery School District (RSD) to take control of, operate, and reorganize schools that are “academically acceptable” for four consecutive years (Garda, 2010). The importance of the RSDA was that it “established the foundation for the state to move forward with the takeover of individual schools that met the criteria established in the legislation (Schwam-Baird & Mogg, 2010, p.165).” This act would play a major role in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In 2004 the state broadened the circumstances under which the RSD could intervene. It created the “academically in crisis” category to refer to districts in which more than 30 schools are academically unacceptable or more than 50% of the students attend schools that are academically unacceptable (Garda, 2010). The Louisiana State Board of Education almost immediately declared the Orleans Parish School District to be in academic crisis which allowed the RSD to take over five schools and convert them into charter schools (Johnson, 2008).

### **Hurricane Katrina**

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005. The category five storm flooded the city, displaced over 64,000 students, caused \$800 million in damages to public school buildings, and left less than 20 (out of the 120 total) school

buildings useable (Garda, 2010). Sajan George, managing director of Alvarez & Marsal the firm hired by the State to manage the OPSD's finances, described the challenges of reopening schools after Katrina

What don't we have to do? We've been submitted bids to get repair work done...Once you get the schools repaired, you need to get EPA clearance. They've got to do mold testings throughout the schools...We've got to contract bussing services. We've got to look into temporary housing... a lot of the employees who want to come back don't have houses to come in to. We've got to get food into the schools. Our cafeterias are wiped out. You got to clean the schools. You got to get textbooks and supplies. You got to get the configure... the grade configurations right. You've got to get classes set up, curriculum. And then last but not least, we got to get the money to pay for all this (Morrow, 2005).

One Orleans Parish principal described the state of their school after the storm, "there was no running water, the kitchen was not in service. No public address system, no phone system, no fire alarm system (Beabout, 2010, p.410)." According to another Orleans Parish principal whose school was severely damaged by six feet of flood water, "[We had] no building, no books, no furniture, no school supplies, and no staff (Douglas, 2010, p.2)."

Almost immediately conservative education groups and the Education Industry Association interest group began lobbying in Baton Rouge and Washington DC to use this disaster as an opportunity to create "a new paradigm of publicly

funded, market-based schools that provide flexibility for families (Dingerson, 2006, p.9).” State leaders viewed charter schools as the key to fixing the city’s education system and the means to finally strip the OPSB and UTNO teacher union of their power and influence. Elder (2010) believes that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina charter schools were “the right idea at the right time (p.399).”

### **Disaster Capitalism**

Disaster capitalism is the notion developed by Naomi Klein (2007) that catastrophic events (such as 9/11 that resulted in the increase of the military-industrial complex through the “war on terror” in Iraq) are foreseeable and strategically devised to allow for corporate profiteering at the time of disaster and during the recovery efforts that follow. During instances where disaster capitalism is operating, rather than rebuilding what existed previously, those hoping to advance corporate goals use “moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering (Klein, 2007, p.8)” allowing industries to redevelop devastated areas rapidly with little to no awareness of the impact of their actions by local communities (Klein, 2007). By producing and exploiting disasters, businesses have created a means to profit with no-bid reconstruction projects, resort development, and even public services for children (Perez & Canella, 2011).

Examples of the situations produced by policy changes after Katrina, i.e. disaster capitalism in action, include (1) the ability to quickly and exuberantly refurbish particular schools serving the wealthy like Lusher charter school in

Uptown New Orleans, (2) access limitations that inhibited free, and continued right of entry/enrollment to schools because of “hidden” admissions requirements (e.g. parent participation standards that influence the student’s continued enrollment at the school), (3) a decentralized system that results in some children and their parents searching for a school (e.g. 20+ different entities operating 30 schools at one point in time), and (4) the creation of a business model for education that encourages cuts in school expenditures, adversely impacting teachers, students, and communities (for example by eliminating enrichment programs and services for children with special needs and failing to provide adequate facilities/instructional materials for students and teachers).

The number of charter schools in New Orleans has grown from 5 in 2004-2005 before Katrina to currently 79 (out of 86 schools total) as enterprising, for-profit and non-profit organizations seek investment opportunities, such as FirstLine Schools, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), New Beginnings School Foundation-Capital One- University of New Orleans Charter Network, and the Einstein Group, Inc. (Perez & Canella, 2011). The state-run Recovery School District (RSD) became the nation’s first all-charter district in the 2014-2015 school year and currently oversees 49 charter schools. The Orleans Parish School District currently runs 6 traditional public schools and oversees 25 charter schools.

There are currently debates about whether the remaining 6 OPSD public schools should be converted into charter schools or not. Surprisingly, the district is in support of this, while parents vehemently oppose the chartering of these schools,

which are among the highest-performing in the city. Another current issue is reunification, which was authorized by the recently passed Act 91, and calls for the return of all RSD charter schools to the Orleans Parish School District by 2018. Four RSD charter schools chose to return to the OPSD this year (Cowen Institute, 2016, p.9). Some are hopeful that a return to the traditional public school model will follow afterwards. A third issue revolves around the mechanism through which charter schools can be authorized and created. According to Louisiana law, primarily Act 35 passed in 2005 after Katrina, only “failing” schools taken over by the State may be converted into charter schools, which in essence “caps” the total number of schools in the city. Charter operators are wanting to open more schools in New Orleans, but with the RSD already at 100 percent charter, there are no more schools to in the district to be converted into charters. Charter operators are pushing legislators to authorize them the power to create as many new charter schools as they want. This is similar to the situation in Detroit, MI where state lawmakers removed the cap on the number of charter operators allowed to operate in the state as well as the number of charter schools they can open. This created a unique problem for public schools and charter schools in Detroit- too many schools and not enough students. In 2013, there were 370 charter schools (109 in Detroit) run by 296 charter operators in Michigan (Dixon, 2014). The combination of residents moving out of Detroit and the unlimited number of charter operators and charter schools allowed in the state has resulted in “20,000 to 30,000 more seats

than students in the city's traditional and charter schools (Lake, Jochim, & DeArmond, 2015)."

### **Competing Visions for Post-Katrina School Reform**

Miron (2008) notes that in post-Katrina New Orleans, the debate revolved around the question of whether the previous "traditional" public school system was worth rebuilding or should lawmakers use this "opportunity of a lifetime" to create a brand new school system, one capable of providing a "world-class" education to all students (p.241).

On the one hand were neoliberal reformers who strongly pushed for the creation of an all-charter school system in New Orleans. Based on the works of economists Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberals believe that the markets can be trusted to solve the nation's economic and social problems (Saltman, 2005). From their perspective, governments are incapable of properly running public institutions such as schools and prisons because of the "bloated" government bureaucracy and endless red tape, which slows services and wastes taxpayers' money. Thus, privatization is their solution.

Neoliberals argue that private companies, which are primarily profit driven, can more efficiently and effectively run these institutions because they are free from and not limited by government bureaucracy, unions, and legal red tape. Included in this rhetoric is the connection between market-based economic policies (privatization) and "freedom". We often hear that American citizens, referred to as

consumers, should be free to choose their healthcare provider, schools, etc. and that businesses should be free from government regulation because it hampers their ability to grow and increase profits. Charter schools, many of which are run by for-profit charter management operators (CPO), receive federal per-pupil funding like traditional public schools but are given more autonomy, which in theory allows them to be more effective and efficient. The use of public funds as a source of corporate profits is the privatizing aspect of charter schools (Perez & Cannella, 2011).

Neoliberals also see a lack of accountability and discipline as causes for school failure. They believe that unions protect teachers and administrators and so they have little incentive to “work harder.” The markets would solve this problem through competition. Like businesses, charter schools are forced to compete with one another for students and resources (faculty, funding), with low performing schools forced to close down- this by extension would hold teachers and administrators accountable for their performance. Students are forced to compete with one another for limited spots at high-performing schools, with lower performing students, those with learning difficulties, behavior issues, and/or disabilities relegated to “lesser” schools or they are excluded completely from the education system.

Opponents of privatization argue that because businesses are profit-driven, it is in their nature to find ways to cut costs, which in turn reduces the quality and effectiveness of the services they provide. For-profit schools have been found to 1)



hire less experienced teachers, 2) standardize curriculum and operating procedures, and/or 3) recruit and keep students who are less demanding of resources (Saltman, 2005, p.168). Privatization also makes records/accounting/finances private, thus taking away public oversight and scrutiny, which makes it difficult to hold for-profit schools accountable for their improprieties. In order to cut costs and/or increase profits many charter schools look to private subcontractors to provide school-related services at the lowest cost (i.e. transportation services, food services, security, education/curriculum specialists), which may result in lower quality of services rendered.

Saltman (2000) adds to the critique of privatizing education and forced competition, arguing that it is both inherently undemocratic. Public education is a common good that benefits everyone and schools are a “public forum (p.53)” where differing ideas intersect and compromises are made in a democratic fashion. Saltman (2000) believes that when schools are privatized, local communities lose control of their schools and dissenting voices are “locked out” from debates (p.53). Privatizing education means that it is no longer a common good- it becomes a scarce commodity that is no longer easily accessible by everyone. Buras (2008) argues that post-Katrina New Orleans has become “an experimental ground zero for brutal attacks on public sector and radical reconstructions of public schooling...[through the establishment of] an all-charter district premised on decentralization, managerial networks, and choice (p.4).”

Buras, Saltman, and others oppose privatization and instead advocate for the

strengthening of public schools by addressing issues of economic inequalities and racial injustices. They see the use of property taxes to fund public schools along with increasing tax breaks for corporations as the main causes of school inequalities and school failures in the United States. I, too, oppose education reform policies based on privatization of traditional public schools as seen in New Orleans, Philadelphia, and other large urban cities. These neoliberal policies do little to address the long-standing racial, social, and economic factors that have continue to impact the majority poor and colored populations in these areas. True educational reform policies need to address the inequities and inequalities that has created the achievement gap and limited the educational opportunities for a significant segment of our population.

### **Post-Katrina Charter Schools**

The lobbying of conservative interest groups paid off as in late September 2005 the federal government offered a \$20.9 million grant to only assist new and existing charter schools in New Orleans with no money going to public schools. This can be seen as an unwillingness from the Bush administration to help restore New Orleans' traditional public school system, instead preferring to "issue financial resources that would allow private enterprises to make a profit from public education (Johnson, 2012)."

In order to receive some of this funding and because it was unable to open any schools for the 2005-2006 school year, the bankrupt OPSB approved twenty

charter school applications. At was at this point that the OPSB lost the long-time support of the public. The returning citizens of New Orleans were furious that the OPSB was unable to open any schools and thus charter schools were their only alternative.

To make it easier to create and convert charter schools, then-Governor Kathleen Blanco first signed executive orders that waived state laws requiring faculty and parental consent for conversion of public schools into charters schools (Dingerson, 2006). Then on November 30, 2005 Blanco signed Act 35 into law, which broadened the circumstances under which the state could over schools. The state was now allowed to take control of schools that were not “academically unacceptable” but had school performance scores below the state average, so long as the school was in a district designated as being in “academic crisis”. With the OPSD being the only district in the state labeled as in “academic crisis”, Act 35 led to the transfer of over 107 New Orleans public schools to the RSD and “changed the educational governance structure from a centralized, single-district system to a multi-operator, decentralized model that contemplated a rise in charter schools (Garda, 2010).” Because of its massive loss of schools, the OPSB voted to fire almost 7,500 employees, 6000 of which were unionized teachers (Schwam-Baird, 2010, p.175-176).” This in essence destroyed the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) union with only 300 unionized teachers still employed after the passage of Act 35 (Schwam-Baird, 2010, p.176). There are currently seven types of schools in New Orleans; each differing in the way they are funded, how they are authorized, as well

as their enrollment and hiring policies. Based on the school choice model, New Orleans has an “open enrollment” policy in which parents are free to apply for admissions for their children to any school in the city with the school providing transportation for the students, should they be accepted (Schwam-Baird & Mogg, 2010). Open enrollment does not guarantee acceptance as many non-RSD schools have requirements for admission. RSD schools on the other hand have an “open access” policy in which they cannot have requirements for admissions and are required to accept every student that applies (Schwam-Baird & Mogg, 2010).

A 2010 study from the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty (IRP), concluded that the charter school movement in post-Katrina New Orleans has created a five “tiered” system of public schools in which not every student in the city receives the same quality education...[the system] sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools in the OPSB and BESE sectors, while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty schools in the RSD sector (p.3).”

BESE and OPSB charter schools outperform RSD schools because they are able to use admissions requirements to screen applicants while RSD charter schools must accept all students. The IRP (2010) reported that: 87 percent of white students in New Orleans attended a BESE or OPSB charter school and while only 18 percent of black students attended those schools; 75 percent of black students attended an RSD school and only 18 percent of white students attended an RSD school (p.3). BESE and OPSB schools also have lower poverty rates, fewer students with

disabilities, and more gifted students/programs than RSD schools. Issues of segregation and poverty, which plagued the pre-Katrina school system, still exists in this new system and continues to impact students of color in New Orleans.

### **“Successful” School Reform in New Orleans**

The accountability movement has placed urban schools in a tough predicament as they are forced to increase student performance while receiving decreased funding. Using New Orleans as a model of “success and innovation”, neoliberal reformers are pushing for increased charter schools in large urban areas (Cowen Institute, 2013). School “success” in post-Katrina New Orleans is defined as- 1) increased student performance on the state standardized LEAP/iLEAP test and 2) the closing of “failing” schools (Maxwell 2008, *New York Times* 2011). Articles in both *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* praise the charter school movement for decreasing the number of “academically unacceptable” schools (Maxwell, 2008) and for increasing the number of students scoring “basic” or above on state tests (*New York Times*, 2011). This narrow definition of “success” is problematic because it allows reformers to ignore the deeply rooted issues associated with class and race that has and continues to impact students of color in New Orleans.

Questions have been raised about the “success” of charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. Schools are rated each year based upon their “School Performance Score” (SPS), which measures their students’ performance on the state standardized tests known as the iLEAP (3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> grades) and LEAP (4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>

grades). Schools failing to meet their SPS goal may be taken over by the State or closed down. Figure 5-1 shows that most of public schools in pre-Katrina New Orleans were rated as “1-star” or “academically unacceptable.”

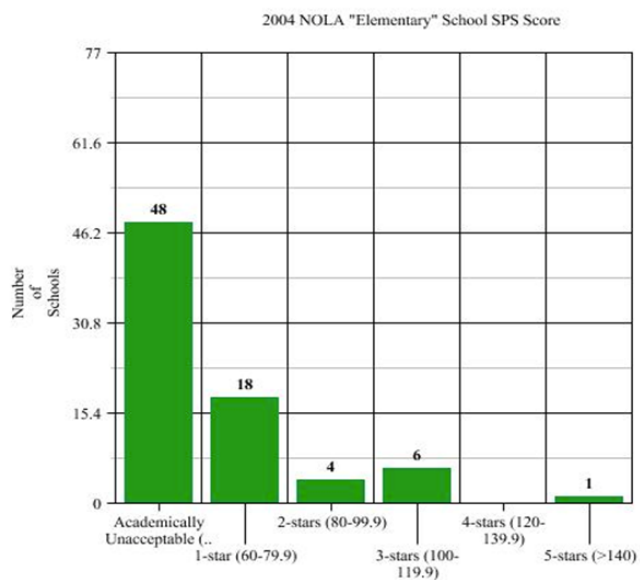


Figure 5-1: 2004 New Orleans School SPS Scores

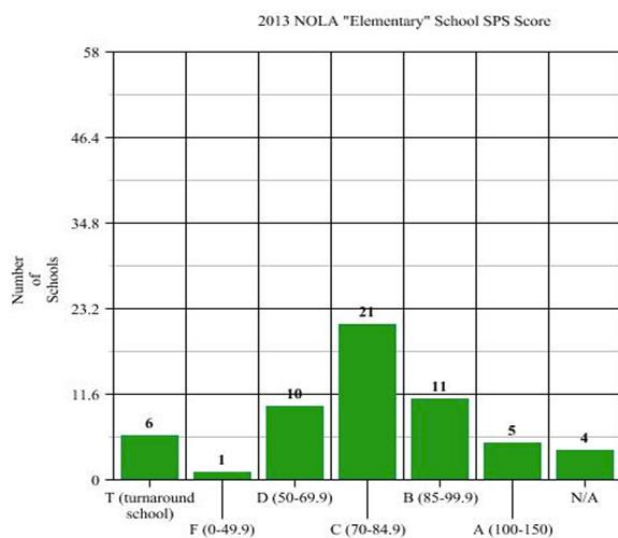


Figure 6-1: 2013 New Orleans School SPS Scores

Figure 6-1 shows the breakdown of elementary school SPS scores in 2013. State lawmakers and pro-charter advocates like to claim that New Orleans' experiment is successful because of the increase in test scores from pre- to post-Katrina. At first glance, it does seem that there is positive growth in SPS scores. Upon closer inspection, we see that the grading scale has been modified by the state. The pre-Katrina SPS scoring system used a 140-point scale with assigned grades ranging from "academically unacceptable (SPS below 60) to "5-star" (SPS above 140). The post-Katrina SPS scoring system originally used a 200-point scale with assigned grade ranging from "A" to "F." The scoring system was modified to use a lower 150-point scale in 2013. We can show the differences by using an SPS score of "100" as an example. In 2004-05, a school with an SPS score of "100" would be rated as an in- the-middle "3-star" school, yet in 2013-14 a school with an SPS score of "100" would be rated as an "A" school- the top rating. Modifying the SPS scale makes it difficult to examine how much progress students in New Orleans are actually making. Another modification to the scoring system is the introduction of the "turnaround (T)" category. Schools in this category are in the process of being taken over either by the state or by another charter operator and would normally be rated as an "F" school or "academically unacceptable." However, schools receiving a "T" rating are not counted under the "F" category and therefore lawmakers can claim that the number of failing schools in the city is decreasing. Because of this, it is difficult to conclude whether or not charter schools are actually meeting the needs of all their students.

In *The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education*, Saltman (2005) cites a study of Edison schools' performance conducted by the Western Michigan University Evaluation Center which concluded, "Edison students do not perform as well as Edison claims in its annual reports on student performance (p. 70)." Saltman (2005) also cites a study conducted by the American federation of Teachers which found "inferior test performance by charter schools in comparison to public schools (p.70-71)." Similarly, a study of schools in post-Katrina New Orleans conducted by the University of Minnesota Institute on Race and Poverty (2010) found that there was "not so much" difference in school performance between traditional schools and charter schools (p.4). By their preferred measure of success, i.e. student performance on standardized tests, charter schools have been found to come up short of their promises. While traditional public schools must accept all students, the University of Minnesota Institute on Race and Poverty study (2010) found that the highest performing charter schools in New Orleans

skim the easiest-to-educate students through selective admissions requirements...shape their enrollments by using their enrollment practices, discipline and expulsion practices, transportation policies, location decisions, and marketing and recruiting efforts (p.4).

Saltman (2005), Carr (2006), Buras (2011), myself, and others believe that schools have the potential to "facilitate democratic education (Saltman, 2005, p.68)," where students become active citizens and agents of change in their communities.



**Opposition to privatization**

During the 2004-05 school year, there were only five charter schools in New Orleans because efforts by the state to take over OPSB schools were always met with fierce resistance by the UTNO teacher's union and community members who wanted New Orleans public schools to remain under local control. Act 35, which allowed the RSD to takeover 107 OPSD schools, was passed in November 2005 with little resistance because Hurricane Katrina had displaced most of New Orleans' citizens.

Reactions varied as citizens returning to post-Katrina New Orleans found their neighborhood schools replaced by charter schools. Some parents welcomed the change while others were outraged. In late-2005, resistance to charter schools was so fierce in the Algiers neighborhood that residents and the UTNO teacher's union filed separate lawsuits in an attempt to stop the first wave of charter schools from opening in post-Katrina New Orleans and armed National Guardsmen were needed to secure the first meeting of the Algiers Charter Association (Garda, 2010).

In 2010, Algiers community members wanted to keep L.B. Landry High School under local community control and applied for a charter themselves, which was rejected by the Louisiana Department of Education (Chang, 2010). The community was further angered when the school was instead given to the Algiers Charter Association.

In 2013, community members of New Orleans East protested the RSD's plan to close Sarah T. Reed High School, one of the few high schools in the area, rather

than return it to the OPSB. Disregarding the community's wishes and needs, the RSD closed the school in 2014 and is currently looking for a charter operator to reopen and run the school in 2016 (Dreillinger, 2014).

### **“Top-Down” Education Reform**

The previous section shows why many are opposed to “top-down” education reform, where policies are imposed upon local schools by state and federal lawmakers without input from the community (Carr, 2006). Federal legislation such as NLCB and “Race to the Top” can be seen as examples of neoliberal ideology- the use competition and fear as motivation. Under these legislative acts, schools must compete with one another for funding and those that do not meet performance standards are taken over or closed down. Saltman (2005) argues, “top-down” reform in conjunction with the “accountability” movement “ignores deeply rooted issues of economic inequalities and racial injustices (p.199)” and instead focuses solely on educational output as measured by standardized tests. Carr (2006) and Johnson (2011) both envision a more democratic “bottom-up” approach to education reform where local schools and communities play a vital part in the educational decision-making process. This approach to educational reform would also help to expand the role of the school to become “hubs” for community activism, which would help revitalize and empower high-poverty neighborhoods (Elder, 2010, p.439).

### **Implications for an All-Charter District**

According to the Cowen Institute (2013), 84% of the students in New Orleans attended charter schools during the 2012-2013 school year, the highest in the country by a wide margin- Detroit and Washington D.C. are next at 41% each (p.8). Post-Katrina schools in New Orleans are still highly segregated (89% black) and poor (82% receiving free/reduced lunch), with the number even higher (95% black, 91% receiving free/reduced lunch) for students attending RSD schools (Cowen Institute, 2013).

At the start of the 2014-2015 school year, the Recovery School District in New Orleans became the first all-charter district in the United States. The OPSB still runs six traditional public schools, which ironically given the OPSB's track record, are all very high performing. Because schools with admissions requirements are tend to be higher performing, they have been accused of only taking the best students and relegating "lesser" students (students with disabilities and/or behavioral/emotional needs) to the RSD schools, which are seen by some as a "dumping ground" for "problem students". Initial studies show that some charter schools discriminate against students with disabilities and/or behavioral/emotional needs, and thus leaving those students without access to education and services to which they are lawfully entitled to. This has made it difficult for many parents looking to enroll their children with special needs as all students were guaranteed admission to their local neighborhood school under the traditional public school model prior to Katrina.

## **Conclusion**

The charter school movement in New Orleans is the culmination of the long-standing battle between white state lawmakers and black educators and citizens for control of the school system. For years, state lawmakers were unable to make any changes to the OPSD because of the strength of the teachers' union and its ability to garner public support. Hurricane Katrina offered state lawmakers "an opportunity of a lifetime" to recreate the school system. With its citizens evacuated to other cities and unable to fight back, state lawmakers passed new legislation, which in conjunction with pre-Katrina legislation, allowed the RSD to seize control of 107 OPSD public schools and to begin converting them into charter schools. The current issue is whether or not the RSD has the power to open new charter schools, as they are only authorized to take over and convert "failing" schools.

As neoliberal school reformers look to privatize other low-performing urban school districts around the nation, they tend to highlight the charter school movement in New Orleans as a "successful model" for school reform. However, charter schools' success in New Orleans (as only measured by standardized test scores) belies the charge that they use illegal tactics to exclude students from their schools. The charter school movement in New Orleans has occurred with little input from the citizens of the city. For these reasons, I believe that the debate over school reform in New Orleans needs to be reframed to include the voices of and input from the community and its families.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methods**

#### **Theoretical Framework: Narrative Research**

This dissertation project is grounded in narrative research which Polkinghorne (1995) describes as “a subset of qualitative research design in which stories are used to describe human action” (p. 5). People express their lived experiences through narratives, thus narrative research is a natural fit for this project as I seek to examine and understand teachers’ experiences at a charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans.

According to Bruner (2004) “we seem to have no other way of describing “lived time” save in the form of a narrative (p. 692).” Similarly, Collins (2013) believes that only through narrative can the “layers of complexity (p. 194)” of human experiences be fully expressed and understood. This is one of the major advantages to narrative as traditional research methods cannot capture the richness and uniqueness of people’s lived experiences. Bruner (2004) argues that this work falls under a constructivist paradigm as narratives are created through “continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of experience (p. 692).” Through narrative research and the collection of teacher narratives, this project was able to gain and provide insight into the teachers’ experiences at NOECS which could not have been accomplished using traditional research methods.

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) discuss the increased use of narrative research in education. The authors believe that this is a natural fit because “education is the

construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 2)." One of the many goals I had for this project was to help teachers share their stories and experiences working at NOECS through teacher narratives as a way to "talk back" to the more dominant media narratives. This can be a powerful tool in education as teachers have little to no input in the current state of "top-down" reform. Through narrative, their voices, expertise, and concerns may be heard. Similarly, Rasheed (2006) argues that teachers need to have a more "substantial role in driving school reform (p.7)."

### **Memory Work**

Data for the teachers' narratives primarily came from their memories and recollections about events and experiences at NOECS. Because the teachers' narratives represented a large and important portion of my dissertation project, I turned to works by Spence (1982) and Radstone (2000) for a better understanding of the methods and methodology of conducting memory work.

### **Historical Truth, Narrative Truth, and Memory Work**

In the text *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* Spence (1982) differentiates between the two as they are often incorrectly seen as synonymous, and explains the significance and implications of using "narrative truth" in research.

Historical truth is often seen as an objective portrayal of “what really happened (Spence, 1982, p. 32).” The goal of historical truth is to provide an “accurate” and “cohesive” account of past events. According to Spence (1982), this can be problematic as historical events are generally seen through the lens of the dominant groups and therefore cannot be objective and neutral. He adds that historical truth, or “what really happened”, does not always correspond to how people experienced and remember those events (Spence, 1982, p. 33). Thus, the goal of narrative truth is to “capture” individuals’ and/or groups’ experiences and remembrances of past events (p. 31). Narrative truth is significant in that it can add depth to or it can challenge historical truth(s) by adding additional perspectives and voices to past events. Spence (1982) notes a shift from focusing on historical truth to narrative truth as the latter “is creative and allows new themes to emerge (p. 173).” This is shown in my project as the teachers’ narratives provided themes which were not present in the media narratives.

In *Memory and Methodology*, Radstone (2000) describes memory work as a form of research that “investigates the links between individual or group memories and the wider and more generalized domains of history, culture, and society (p. 12).” This view reflects my primary goal for the teachers’ narratives in two ways. First, I examined the teachers’ narratives in order to find “links” or similarities and common themes within the teachers’ experiences. I also noted any differing viewpoints or dissimilarities in experiences the teachers may have had while working at NOECS. Second, I looked to find areas of divergence along with areas of

convergence between the teachers' narratives and the media narratives. The media narratives can be seen as the dominant or "generalized" view about the school. Radstone (2000) uses the term "affirmative memory" to describe stories that provide evidence supporting the dominant narrative (p. 216).

Simply critiquing dominant narratives is not enough because of "unequal power relations (Radstone, 2000, p. 220)" which continue to oppress and/or silence marginalized individuals and groups. Radstone (2000) notes that stories can serve as a "form of resistance [that] work against dominant narratives...[to] reposition marginalized individuals and groups (p. 218-219)." This shows the potential of memory work to initiate change. The teachers' narratives in my project are used to affirm or disaffirm and challenge the dominant media narratives about NOECS and the broader charter school movement.

Both Spence (1982) and Radstone (2000) speak of the transformative nature of narrative and memory work. Spence (1982) believes "narrative truths can lead to new discoveries about historical events as participants "see" events in a different way (p. 164)."

Many participants spoke of how their experiences at NOECS impacts their current views and approaches towards teaching. Reflecting on his experiences at NOECS, Ross, a white veteran teacher with insider status stated

I felt like I failed, I failed my children...and oddly enough that was a turning point...It's helped me become more conscious and aware [of



my weaknesses] and resolved to be organized and to stay on top of things.

After teaching at charter schools in Kansas City and New Orleans, Beverly, a Black veteran teacher with outsider status now believes “charter schools are not the grand answers to the problems in education. Many are failing worse than district schools. Education should be left up to those who do this job on a daily basis.”

Lucy felt that her time at NOECS helped prepare her to meet the “workload and demands of opening a charter school in Hammond, LA...and serve as its CEO and school leader.”

Radstone (2000) believes that memory work and narratives can be used not only to “heal the wounds of the past... [but also] to transform the way individuals and communities live in and relate to the present and the future (p. 187).” This is similar to the goals of my project to use teachers’ narratives in education reform as well as to “push back” against dominant narratives about the charter school movement in post-Katrina New Orleans.

### **Case Study Design**

Cohen and Manion’s *Research Methods in Education* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) was one of the first published texts to provide an in-depth discussion about case study which they defined as the research of “an individual unit- a child, a clique, a class, a school, or a community...[in order to] probe deeply and analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit (Bassey, 1999, p.24).” In their

definition, the focus on an “individual unit” is very important because it ultimately becomes the “case” in case study. The case can be a single person (a student, a mother, or a teacher), a group of people (a class of students, the faculty members of a school, or district level policymakers), or a phenomenon (effective teaching, school success, or parental involvement). This research examines the case of a single charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Robert Yin, seen by many as the leader in the field, believes that case study helps researchers “understand complex social phenomena...[by allowing] investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2003, p.2).” Another expert in case study research is Robert Stake, who defines case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995, p.xi).” The focus on “real-life events” in Yin’s definition of case study and the understanding of a case “within important circumstances” in Stake’s definition adds another dimension to case study research- the importance of context and the interactions within that context.

### **“Telling Case”**

Mitchell (1983) critiques the notions that case study findings are “invalid because they are based on only one case (p.24),” and instead argues that case study data “can be used to support theoretical conclusions (p.27).” According to Mitchell (1983), singular cases in isolation do little to advance theory-building, yet

the single case becomes significant only when set against the accumulated experience and knowledge that the analyst brings to it... the extent to which generalization may be made from case studies depends on the underlying theory and the whole corpus of related knowledge of which the case is analysed rather than on the particular instance itself (p.36).

Rather than focusing on the “events” of a case, Mitchell (1983) suggests deeper analysis of the “abstract characteristics (p.37)” of these events within the larger context as they may lead to “general explanatory principles (p.37),” i.e. theories. It is up to the researcher to “link” the abstract characteristics of the events in a case in order to illuminate “the general principals... [that are] obscured by confounding side effects (Mitchell, 1983, p.39).”

Like Mitchell, Rex (2000) also advocates for the significance of “telling cases” as tools for theory-building. Citing Mitchell (1984), “The telling case permits the analyst to show how general regularities exist when specific contextual circumstances are taken account of (Rex, 2000, p.322).”

### **New Orleans East Charter School as a “Telling Case”**

My dissertation project utilizes teacher narratives and media narratives to tell the story of a single charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans- the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS). The NOECS was an open-enrollment charter school with a 2011-2012 enrollment of 419 students in grades pk-8. The school

served a predominately poor (100% FRL) and minority population (70% African-American, 22% Vietnamese, and 8% Hispanic). The faculty at NOECS was somewhat diverse with 47% African-American, 38% White, 15% Vietnamese.

There were numerous reasons why the NOECS was selected as the case for this study with the main reason being that I taught there for 4 years. I was personally invested in the growth and success of the school and our students. Having taught at NOECS gave me access to the teachers and also to some school data and documents. Because we had worked together, there seemed to be a sense of trust from the participants which they may not have had with an “outsider.” A final reason for selecting NOECS as the case for this study is that many people believed this was an interesting story that needed to be told.

As the school was taken over and no longer exists as NOECS, I feel that there can be many lessons we can learn from it within the broader context of the charter school movement and neoliberal ideology in post-Katrina New Orleans. For this reason, my case study may be seen as a “telling case.” Green, et al. (2016) view “telling cases” as those where the researcher “inscribes an emic or insider perspective (p.1),” which, as a former teacher at the NOECS, is something I aim to achieve in this study.

## Data Collection

Upon gaining approval for my study, I began by creating a timeline of important events from the creation to the closing of NOECS (see Appendix B). The timeline was revised as I progressed through the data collection phase.

Data sources for narrative case study can come from interviews, observations, and/or documents. For this project, data sources included both interviews and documents. Interviews were used to create teacher narratives and documents were used to create media narratives.

I began the interview phase by creating a chart with the names and grades of teachers at NOECS using information from my memory, the school handbook, and the school website:

Table 1-1. Teachers at NOECS, 2008-2013.

NOECS Teachers	(All Pseudonyms)			
<b>2008-2009</b>	<b>2009-2010</b>	<b>2010-2011</b>	<b>2011-2012</b>	<b>2012-2013</b>
K: Lisa, Sally	K: Jolene, Sally	Pk: Kim, Melissa	Pk: Kim, Melissa	Pk: Melissa
1: Beverly, Jaz	1: Beverly, Yvonne	K: Sally, Holly	K: Sally, Betsy	K: Sally, Betsy
2: Anita, Jessica	2: Anita, Megan	1: Yvonne, Ilene	1: Ilene, Susan	1: Julie, Keisha
3: Tyler, Ross	3: Tyler, Darcy	2: Megan, Cindy	2: Eric, Lily, Sophia	2: Rachel, Nesha
4: Lucy	4: Lucy, Wendy	3: Tyler, Darcy	3: Tyler, Darcy	3: Eric, Stephanie
5: Darcy	5: Victoria	4: Lucy, Anita	4: Victoria, Joy, Sara	4: Sara, Jenny
	6: James	5: Victoria, Sue	5: Molly, Colleen	5: Wanda, Holly
Others: Perry, Eileen, Jessica, Derrick		6-7: Peter, Tom, Kelly, Mike, Kacey	6-8: Peter, Tom, Kelly, Mike, Kacey	6-8: Peter, Tom, Kelly, Kacey

The next step was to find contact information for as many teachers as I could, using phone and email contacts, social media, and websites such as linkedin.com. I managed to contact 25 former co-workers from NOECS and explained the project, its goals, and their role if they chose to participate. Initially, 17 agreed to participate but 4 withdrew citing time constraints and/or personal reasons, leaving a total of 13 participants.

The participants were a diverse group with varying levels of teaching experience, race, and insider/outsider status. Seven participants were experienced teachers (5+ years) and six participants were less experienced teachers (0-4 years). The level of experience may be an important factor in how they perceived their experiences at the school. The teachers' race may be another important factor. Six participants were Black, six were white, 1 was Asian (not counting myself). The participants in the study were also a good mix of "insiders"- teachers who are from New Orleans and have connections to the community, and "outsiders"- teachers not originally from the city, but who came after Katrina.

Table 2-1. Participants' race, experience, and insider/outsider status.

Participants:	Insider Status	Outsider Status
<b>Less-Experienced</b>	Anita (B), Perry (A)	Eileen (W), Victoria (W), Lisa (B), Yvonne (W), Myself (A)
<b>More-Experienced</b>	Ross (W), Eric (B), Derrick (W)	Sara (B), Beverly (B), Lucy (W), Jessica (B)
B= Black, W= White, A= Asian		

After confirming the participants, I began scheduling interviews with them. The data collection phase was a little challenging because of timing and distance issues. I was able to go to New Orleans in June and July 2016 and conducted 2 face-to-face interviews. Because of the summer break, many of the teachers were traveling and 6 had moved out of state. Despite these issues, I was able to conduct 4 phone interviews by the end of August 2016. The other 7 participants chose to answer the interview questions via written response, which I sent via email. Pseudonyms were used throughout all phases of the study in order to safeguard the participants' identities.

## **Interviews**

Interviews are a major data source for narrative work. My interviews can be seen as a combination of "open-ended" and "focused" interview (Yin, 2003). Open-ended interviews use less structured questions in order to allow respondents to "freely" talk about and give their insight on a topic while focused interviews are more structured and consist of specific questions to be asked. This may provide researchers with more in-depth and detailed answers to the selected questions but at the expense of participants' freedom to talk "freely". The face to face and phone interviews I conducted ranged from 32 minutes to 148 minutes, with an average of duration of 109 minutes. I used my laptop to audio record the face to face interviews and used Google Voice to record the phone interviews. Transcription of these interviews was very time consuming and labor-intensive.

Spence (1982) advocates for “constructive listening (p. 192)” during and after interviews in which the researcher takes notes and jottings. This is significant because audio recording and transcription of interviews can leave gaps in understanding. By using “constructive listening” the researcher can potentially fill these gaps with their notes and jottings (Spence, 1982, p. 192). I found this technique to be useful through trial and error. When I interviewed Derrick, the first participant, I relied on the audio recording technology to capture the entire experience of the interview. As I transcribed this interview and began analysis, I realized as Spence (1982) had warned, many gaps which required a second interview with Derrick in order to fill and clarify. After this experience, I used Spence’s “constructive listening” for the other interviews I conducted. By taking notes and jottings during these interviews, it greatly reduced any holes or gaps in understanding during transcription and analysis.

Another interview technique advocated by Spence (1982) is “follow further (p. 180)” in which the researcher seeks to gain a “coherent picture of events in the [interviewee’s] narrative account (p. 180)” by asking for clarification, explanation, and/or more details. I heavily relied on this technique as I conducted my interviews.

Examples:

- 1) Can you give examples of what they would argue about or disagree on?
  
- 2) During your leadership meetings, were these issues brought up?



3) Do you remember what committees you ended up serving on?

4) Aside from what we just talked about, can you think of any other problems the school encountered?

Referring to media narratives as well as to my experiences seemed to really help the interviewees remember specific events and their experiences at NOECS.

Examples:

1) Do you remember instances of your interactions with students and parents? I remember when your student missed the bus and you drove him home.

2) We tried to draw community support. I remember we had a booth at the Vietnamese New Year Festival.

3) I remember seeing it on the news first and then the next morning we had an impromptu meeting to address it. Do you remember that [incident]?

Spoken interviews are also an important data source for memory work.

Radstone (2000) mentions written interviews and narratives as an equally important data source for memory work and to a lesser extent, images and sounds (p.187). For written accounts, the researcher selects certain events and/or themes

to share with the participants. The interviewee(s) then take time to recall their personal experiences then proceed to write “an account of the episode with as much particularity as possible (Radstone, 2000, p. 198).”

Completing a written interview was an option for my participants and seven chose this method. Eileen chose the written interview because “I’ll give better responses if I have time to think about the questions.” Yvonne chose the written interview because “my kids can make talking on the phone pretty difficult.” Lucy also preferred the written interview because preferred to have, “[time] to think about my answers.” For the participants who selected this method, I first modified the interview questions based on their time at NOECS (Appendix A) and then sent the interview questions to the participants via email. While some participants preferred this method, there were some challenges. The major challenge was getting the responses back in a timely manner. Some participants returned their responses within 2 weeks, while some took up to 2 months. I sent reminders every two weeks but did not want to rush the participants and have them potentially withdraw from the project. One participant accidentally deleted the interview form and responses, so I had to wait for her to complete it again. Others asked for more time as they were extremely busy with the new school year was starting. Another challenge, also relating to time, was asking for more details and follow-up questions. Some participants have extremely in-depth responses but some did not. For those with unclear responses, I sent follow-up emails asking for clarification, to which some responded and some did not. While this method did present some challenges, I was

still able to gather a lot of data by having the participants respond to the written interview questions.

### **Documents**

Other data sources used in this study were publicly available documents, which were used to compile the media narratives about NOECS. The documents fell into three categories: 1) news and other media articles about the school, 2) official school documents such as School Performance Score (SPS) on the Louisiana State Leap and iLEAP tests as well as reports and minutes from NOECS Board meetings, and 3) online parent reviews and comments. These documents were readily available online via websites such as nola.com and thelensnola.org. Qualitative researchers consider such documents are usually a good data source because they are “stable,” meaning that documents are “outside the researcher’s influence (Swanborn, 2010, p.73)” and “can be reviewed repeatedly (Yin, 2003, p.86).”

Table 3-1. Types of Documents and Number Collected.

Document Type:	Number Collected:
News and other media articles about the school	17
Official school documents and board meeting reports	21
Online parent reviews and comments	6

## **Data Analysis**

In terms of analysis, Spence (1982) suggests as a first step “putting events in chronological order (p. 180).” For my dissertation project, I created a timeline of important events at NOECS using data from media narratives, teachers’ narratives, and from my own experiences (see Appendix B). This is an important first step as it sets the timeframe or “boundary” for what is included or not included in the study. Spence (1982) considers chronology as only a first step and cannot be relied on by itself because it “is not sufficient [alone]...it is no guarantee that all relevant events have been included (p. 180).” Although the media narrative and teachers’ narrative section of my project are organized chronologically, the findings section is organized by themes which came out of the narratives.

According to Spence (1982) the next steps would be to conduct deeper levels of analysis in order to find “repetition of themes and convergence of similar patterns (p. 183).” Analysis of narratives, wherein the researcher examines the collected data for common themes (Polkinghorne, 1995) was used to analyze the transcribed participant interviews and documents. As common themes begin to surface, the researcher engages in a process called “recursive movement” where they go back into the data to find more examples in order to better clarify and develop their proposed themes (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13).

I began data analysis of the interviews with “open coding” - reading over the interviews individually one at a time and noting in the margins “any word, phrases, or patterns of behavior that seem relevant (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p.85).” For the

next stage of analysis, I examined all the interviews together as part of “focused coding,” where similar instances are grouped, analyzed, and compared in order to find shared characteristics or properties which will lead to the development of analytic codes and themes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).” I then followed the same procedure with the collected documents. The themes that emerged from the data included: 1) Initial optimism and excitement, 2) Problems with Edison and charter schools, 3) Lack of leadership, 4) Issues with school facilities and day to day operations, and 5) Decision to leave the school/School closure.

Narrative analysis was then used as the “second level” of data analysis. Collins (2013) describes narrative analysis as the process of using collected data to “construct a plot that provides coherence among the data...[and] illustrate a relationship among elements or events (p. 197).” Polkinghorne (1995) describes narrative analysis as a process of “synthesizing” the collected data rather than breaking it down “into its constituent parts” (p. 16). I used narrative analysis in order to create the story of the New Orleans East Charter School using the collected media narratives and teacher narratives. Emplotment is the primary tool of narrative research in which the narrator constructs a plot by selecting and sequencing events that comprise a story (Polkinghorne, 1995).

In creating the plot, I began by selecting the founding of the school in 2008 and it’s closing in 2013 as the “temporal boundries (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.7).” Then, using emplotment, I went through the media narratives and teacher narratives to select important events. To sequence the plot, I used a “temporal plot structure

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.9)” in which I organized the data by time (past-present-future), which Connelly & Clandinin (1990) views as helpful in writing the narrative as well as to illuminate the “narrative truth (p. 10)”, findings, meanings, and significance. Recursive movement is also used in narrative analysis as the researcher moves back into the data in order to refine the developing plot. I continuously went back into my data in order to find more examples to further clarify and detail the events. Polkinghorne (1995) views the creation of a plot as the analytic task of narrative research.

Because the narrative research project is a “collaboration” between the researcher and participant(s), Connelly & Clandinin suggest purposefully finding places in the narrative for the “voice of each participant” (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 10). I found that there were many comments and experiences shared by the participants that did not fit under the themes in the “Findings” chapter. I felt that these were too important to leave out so I tried to find a place for them in the “Implications” chapter.

### **Discourse Analysis and Positioning Theory**

Analysis of the media narratives and documents were strongly informed by both discourse analysis and positioning theory. Noting that language and its use is never neutral, Rumenapp (2016) sees discourse analysis as a tool to study “the nature of language *in use*...[such as] the relationship between language use and language ideologies (p.28).” Gee’s (2014) view of discourse analysis is similar to

Rumenapp's (2016), but adds a component of action, "discourse analysis is the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, *but also to do things* [emphasis added] (p.1)."

Because the post-Katrina charter school movement in New Orleans is based on neoliberal ideologies, discourse analysis may help to reveal the connection and interplay between what was written in the collected media narratives and the larger goals and values of neoliberalism. This would fall in line with Gee's (2014b) belief that discourse analysis has the potential to "illuminate the problems and controversies of the world...[to] illuminate issues about the distribution of social goods, who gets helped, and who gets harmed (p.10)." Both Gee (2014b) and Rumenapp (2016) argue that discourse analysis can be used to connect local conversations to broader issues. This may help to better understand the media's portrayal of the NOECS, what was written and why it was written, within the broader goals of privatization and neoliberal school reform.

Gee (2014a) briefly summarizes how to "do" discourse analysis, [The analyst] looks closely at the details of language in an oral or written communication...[then] connect these details to what the speakers or writers mean, intend, and seek to do and accomplish in the world by the way in which they have used language (p.2).

Gee (2014a) also suggests that the analyst look at the purpose of the text, "what is the speaker [or writer] trying to DO and not just what is the speaker [or writer] trying to SAY? (p.50)." These works by Gee (2014a), Gee (2014b), and Rumenapp

(2016) have provided a background of discourse analysis and the tools to use discourse analysis to analyze the collected media narratives.

Positioning theory will also be helpful in my analysis of media narratives and documents about the NOECS. Collins (2010) sees positioning theory as “a lens through which to view social identity formation (p.4),” and in more detail as,

A way to describe the process through which people are placed into different identities and the ways in which they respond by taking up that identity or by attempting to re-position themselves (Collins, 2011, p.410).

Collins’ (2010, 2011) view of positioning theory is similar to Wortham (2004), who sees it as “an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual (p.166).” Positioning theory will be used to illuminate how various entities, such as the NOECS, EdisonLearning, OPSD, RSD, and teachers are positioned in the collected media narratives, along with the impact and implications of their positioning.

Wortham (2004) also discusses the process of “thickening” as “the increase presupposability of an identity over time, as the individual and others come to think of and position him or her as a recognizable kind of person (p.166).” By examining a wide range of media narratives across a long period of time, we may see the positioning of the various entities, such as the NOECS, EdisonLearning, OPSD, RSD, and teachers either reinforced, challenged, or changed.

Both discourse analysis and positioning theory will help in the analysis of



collected media narratives. Discourse analysis will reveal the values, assumptions, and power-relations that may be embedded in the written words of each document. It can also help to connect local conversations to larger, broader issues. Positioning theory will uncover and explain how and why various entities are positioned with the media narratives.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings**

Chapter 5 presents the “story” of the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS) in two distinct parts. The first part of the chapter shows how the school was portrayed through media narratives which consisted of news articles, publicly available documents, and online parent reviews/comments. The second part of the chapter uses teacher narratives to discuss the major events and themes as revealed by those who worked at NOECS.

#### **Media Narratives: The Optimistic Beginning (2008-2009)**

##### **School Mission- “An excellent school for our community”**

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, residents of the New Orleans East Neighborhood (NOEN) were disappointed with the government’s slow response to the disaster and took it upon themselves to rebuild their community. Their disappointment turned to anger when it was announced that the bankrupt Orleans Parish School District (OPSD) would be unable to reopen any of its schools in the area for the 2005-06 school year and would only open 1 school in the community for the 2006-2007 school year (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) elaborated on the problem

A single school was insufficient to meet the community’s needs. It quickly filled up, leaving many children with a commute of at least

thirty minutes and sometimes more to reach downtown and uptown neighborhoods to attend school. (p.141).

The residents of NOEN viewed this as opportunity to create an open-enrolment public charter school that would provide a quality education for the children of the community. Prior to Katrina, many parents in the community chose to send their children to private schools because the OPSD public schools in the area did not have a good reputation. Perry, an NOECS employee who grew up in the community, was sent to private school because his parents had “negative opinions” about the Orleans public schools, such as “the bad kids go there.”

As a result, community members, local church leaders, and several professors from Tulane University and Loyola University formed the New Orleans East Charter School Board and filed an application with the Recovery School District (RSD) to open a charter school in the neighborhood in October 2007. On August 18, 2008, the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS) was open. An article on Buisnesswire.com describes the founding of the school in an optimistic tone:

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of residents of the New Orleans East Neighborhood were stranded at the New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church. Nearly three years later, those same residents will celebrate the opening of the new New Orleans East Charter School temporarily on the same site (“EdisonLearning Expands,” 2008).

This segment from Buisnesswire.com’s article is consistent with the four documents

I analyzed about the opening of the school and its portrayal of both the community and the charter school. Note that the author positions the school as a symbol for the community's perseverance to return and rebuild after Katrina- the residents who were "stranded" during Hurricane Katrina can now "celebrate" this event.

"Stranded" is an accurate term as residents NOEN faced up to 8 feet of water during Katrina. Family members who did not evacuate were forced to the roofs of their houses where they waited to be rescued. "Celebrate" implies a sense of closure and new beginning post-Katrina for the community and its residents with the opening of New Orleans East Charter School.

According to an online press release of the NOECS's opening, the school's mission and vision was:

to create an excellent school for our community with academic rigor, great pride in diverse cultures, and a passion for learning throughout life...Our vision is a community-based school that will reflect the lives of the community and integrate our projects into the curriculum and students' daily lives ("New Orleans East Charter School," 2008).

This statement speaks to the community's involvement and connection to the school as well as the hope that the school could become a unifying factor to the diverse cultures within the community. The NOECS Board wanted to use the school as a means to unify the community. This was an important aspect of the school's mission because the community had been somewhat "fractured" prior to Katrina. The community was divided into three distinct spaces: one predominantly

Vietnamese, one predominantly African-American, and after Katrina, one predominantly Hispanic. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the demographics of the New Orleans East Neighborhood (NOEN) was 43% Black, 42% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 1.4% White. This is much different than the demographics of the entire city of New Orleans, which is 60% Black, 33% White, 5% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. Residents of the NOEN primarily stayed in their space and had little interaction with members of the other neighboring spaces. An online news article similarly describes the opening of NOCES and its mission, “community members designed the school to promote academic rigor and racial healing across eastern New Orleans’ diverse communities (Cohen, 2012).”

The NOECS Board envisioned the school as a means to bring these (neighbors) diverse groups of people together, to learn and respect one another’s culture as well as to provide a free and quality education for the children of the community, which has been historically underserved (Seidman, 2013). The creation of NOECS closely mirrors Ravitch’s (2014) view that the “ideal” charter school is one “created by the community, to serve the community, reflecting the goals and needs of the community (p.251).”

The school’s charter also called for an open enrollment policy, which meant that any student living in the parish (county) was eligible to attend the school (provided there were openings) without being screened and/or tested. This was important because NOECS was one of the few charter schools in the area that was “open-enrollment”. Other nearby corporate charter schools did not have “open-

enrollment” and used screening and/or testing as part of the admissions process which resulted in many children from the community not being admitted to those schools. This is one of the major critiques of “selective” charter schools. Through admissions testing and screening, they are able to “cream” the best students across the city and deny access to students who may be seen as “undesirable”, i.e. students of color, students with disabilities, students with behavior challenges (Garda, 2010, Schwam-Baird & Mogg, 2010). Unlike the selective charter schools that seek out the best and brightest student, the NOECS charter application stated,

The school has been intentionally designed to meet the needs of students within its community, NOEC. We expect that most of these students will be economically disadvantaged, and therefore fit the federal government’s definition of students in “at-risk” situations, including low achievement, behavioral issues, truancy, drug abuse and dependency, pregnancy and serious emotional issues are common. In addition, we are anticipating a number of English Language Learners among our student population... The NOECS will provide the support that its at-risk students may need as the school strives to achieve academic success for all of its students (“NOECS Charter Application”, 2008, p.7).

### **Partnership with EdisonLearning- “Help us reach our goal”**

Prior to approving the charter for NOECS, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) placed the condition that the NOECS Board hire a

charter management company to help run the school for the duration of the charter (5 years). The Board decided to hire EdisonLearning, which was described by a Businesswire.com article as, “the nation’s largest partner to public school districts and communities (“EdisonLearning Expands,” 2008).” In this article EdisonLearning is described in positive terms and there is no mention that they are a for-profit company. The article quotes Terry Stecz, president and CEO of EdisonLearning

We are committed to Louisiana. With our partners...we are building a model for high-performing urban schools of the future- a new educational framework for communities to strengthen their identity and build pride...We are honored to provide our experience, knowledge, and innovation to this endeavor and help create a dynamic and supportive environment that every child deserves (“EdisonLearning Expands,” 2008).

The arrangement between EdisonLearning and the NOECS is described as a “partnership” which implies equal responsibility and effort. However, the article does not mention the more than \$600,000 EdisonLearning was charging the NOECS Board for their services each year. According to the charter application, EdisonLearning was hired “to manage the school to ensure the academic program is a success, the organization is financially viable, and that the school is faithful to its charter (“NOECS Charter Application”, 2008, p.5).”

There is also a paternalistic and condescending tone to this quote. For example, it is implied that “high-performing urban schools” could not exist in

Louisiana with EdisonLearning. Stecz positions the people of New Orleans as incapable of initiating positive changes themselves and thus need the help of “outsiders” such as EdisonLearning. Alternatively, Stecz positions EdisonLearning as a sort of savior in this “partnership,” one who will provide what local school leaders are lacking in “experience, knowledge, and innovation.” Yvonne, a Teach for America alum who came to New Orleans after Katrina noted, “I get the feeling that the people of New Orleans don’t want to be “fixed” by outside organizations.” Based on my experiences teaching in New Orleans, I whole-heartedly agree with Yvonne’s insight. There seems to be resentment among native New Orleanians towards the large influx of “outsiders” after Katrina. Perry, an Asian NOECS faculty member and native New Orleanian, commented, “We can take care of ourselves...we don’t need anyone’s help...we don’t need to be saved.”

Stecz’s positioning of New Orleans in this manner is an example of neoliberal approach of “governance by experts and elites (Saltman, 2007, p.145).” In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise, Cato and Manhattan Institutes advocated for neoliberal reform policies the solution to fixing the perceived “broken” school system in New Orleans as well as to “emancipate [New Orleans] residents from the ‘tyranny’ of teachers’ unions (Akers, 2012, p.36).” The State turned to Teach for America (TFA) to replace the 6,000 unionized teachers that were fired in Katrina’s aftermath. TFA recruits and trains uncertified, young college graduates to teach in urban schools. Corporate charter schools rely on inexperienced TFA teachers because of their



lower “costs.” TFA teachers are paid a lower salary than veteran teachers and are also non-union, with “no expectation of a pension (Buras, 2011, p. 310).”

Father Vincent, who was the pastor of New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church and one of the leaders in bringing the new public charter school to the New Orleans East Neighborhood, is also quoted in the article,

We believe that all children- whether they are African-American, Asian, Latino, or Caucasian- need to be empowered by education, and our partnership with EdisonLearning will help us reach our goal (“EdisonLearning Expands,” 2008).

Father Vincent’s words reiterate the optimism with which the community welcomed this school. Their hope was that this school, founded by community members after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, would be successful in providing a quality education to all children of the New Orleans East Neighborhood. Father Vincent, like Stecz, describes the relationship as a “partnership” rather than what it was in reality: a business-customer arrangement. The line “will help us reach our goal” gives the sense that NOECS needs EdisonLearning in order to be successful and again serves to reinforce Stecz’s narrative.

Media narratives during this time also portrayed NOECS in a positive light. A news article from a local news website published in March of 2008 was titled “Five new N.O. charter schools now have homes.” It discussed the Recovery School District assigning “new homes” for some charter schools including NOECS (Simon, 2009). For the first school year (2008-09) and roughly 3 months into the second

school year (2009-10), NOECS operated on the premises of the New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church. In mid-October 2009, the second school year, NOECS moved to a “new campus” consisting of “modular buildings” behind Samantha Robert High School, which was located in the same neighborhood. The news article mentions that NOECS was “open-enrollment and do not have admissions criteria” which was one of the main aspects of the school’s mission. Most of the higher performing charter schools in New Orleans have admissions criteria as a way to “skim” the best and brightest students. The NOECS board wanted to create a quality school for all students. It is also the first time that the media acknowledged Edison Schools (they had changed their name by this time) as a for-profit company.

### **Edison Schools- “Doing just fine”**

Other news articles published around this time (Spring 2009) continued to portray NOECS and Edison Schools in a positive light. For example, an April, 9th, 2009 article in the local Times-Picayune newspaper states that while some charter schools with for-profit management companies in New Orleans “struggled to attract the same talent as nonprofit operators and compete in an environment where average salaries and school busing costs have spiked since Katrina (Carr, 2009),” NOECS and their partnership with Edison Schools appeared “to be on the right track” and “doing just fine” despite having to pay Edison for their services (Carr, 2009). During this time period, Edison Schools was the nation’s largest Education Management Operator (EMO). Whereas many new charter operators “struggled”

with startup problems, having “economies of scale (Lake, Dusseault, et al, 2010)” helped Edison to avoid them.

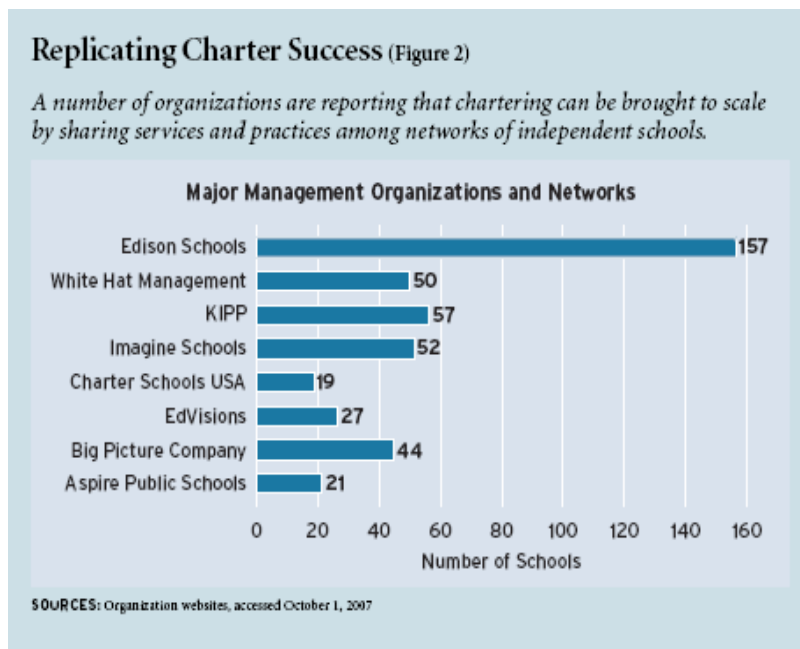


Figure 7-1: Number of charter schools run by EMO's in 2007 (Lake, Dusseault, et al, 2010).

Around the same time, Google profiled EdisonLearning positively in their finance section

Light bulbs switch on daily at EdisonLearning. The firm works with school districts and administrators to help improve school performance. It manages the operations of public and charter K-12 schools, ranging from curriculum decisions to community relations. EdisonLearning focuses on retaining quality teachers, engaging students and families, creating individualized instruction, and achievement-driven

management. The company also provides online tutoring programs, hybrid instructional environments, and school design. EdisonLearning serves more than 450,000 students through partnerships with almost 400 schools in 20 US states, the UK and Abu Dhabi (“EdisonLearning,” 2009).

This section provided and analyzed the media narratives about the opening of NOECS and its partnership with EdisonLearning. While the articles positively portrayed the school as a symbol for the community’s return after Hurricane Katrina, it also disturbingly positioned the school and community as “needing” EdisonLearning in order to be successful.

## **Media Narratives: Problems Arise (2010-2012)**

### **Convicted Felon at NOECS- “I’m not comfortable with a thief working there”**

In May of 2010 a local news channel surprisingly reported that NOECS was employing a convicted felon. The news report caught everyone off guard and revealed that Helen, an administrative assistant at NOECS, was convicted of “embezzling almost \$1 million from a Capital One Bank where she used to work (“Convicted Felon Employed,” 2010).” News crews converged on the school’s location as news reporters interviewed NOECS parents for their reactions which ranged from “very surprised” to “not comfortable with a thief working there...it sets a bad example for the kids.” Faculty members were mostly kept in the dark about the situation and how it was handled. Principal Patricia called an impromptu meeting that morning and told the staff that she would personally handle all parent

and media questions and concerns. Helen admitted that the news report was true and that she would be leaving the school. Many faculty members questioned how the situation was handled as there was seemingly no formal resolution. This can be seen as another critique of privatization, in that records are kept private, which minimizes public oversight and scrutiny. This incident at the end of the second school year represented the turning point in the narrative of NOECS as a successful school and how it was presented in media narratives. While prior news stories depicted the school with an optimistic and hopeful tone, this and future media narratives would present the school in a more negative manner.

### **Break with Edison- “Promised the school wonderful things that never happened”**

By this time, the “partnership” between NOECS and Edison was also beginning to breakdown as Edison’s fees were straining NOECS’s budget. The Board also accused Edison of not meeting their contractual obligations as Edison had virtually no presence at the school. The NOECS Board meeting on September 15, 2011 centered around how to address NOECS’s budget deficit, which exceeded \$300,000 (Gonzales, 2011). An online article reported that “EdisonLearning proposed a plan that pairs debt forgiveness with budget cuts (Gonzales, 2011).” I attended this meeting and part of Edison’s plan was to fire a substantial number of teachers. The board refused to fire any teachers and instead “asked EdisonLearning for a budget breakdown of revenues and expenses in the past and current school

years (Gonzales, 2011)” in the attempt to reduce Edison’s yearly fee. The two sides could not come to terms and the public meeting ended in a stalemate as the board members retreated into a private executive session to discuss other approaches to address the debt to Edison. An online parent comment questions the causes of tension between Edison and the NOECS Board and asks whether it is out of “concern about our children” or was it because of “money issues” (“Convicted Felon Employed,” 2010).

The NOECS Board met again on October 20, 2011. The local website, [thelensnola.org](http://thelensnola.org) provided a detailed report of the meeting, which centered around the Board’s decision to terminate their relationship with EdisonLearning (Gonzales, 2011). An EdisonLearning representative reminded the Board members

[Edison] had initially offered the school a debt-forgiveness plan which now may be rescinded. She said the company is troubled by the breakdown in its relationship with the school...She said Edison had a vision for New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and partnered to create a better school system and community (Gonzales, 2011).

Board member Kristin responded

[The] quality education has been received due to quality teachers. Edison Learning promised the school wonderful things that never happened...It’s like having a friend for two years and they keep on waiting but nothing ever happens...the school’s financial situation results from EdisonLearning’s high management fee...[that] has

made it impossible to comply with fiscal policies expected of charter schools in exchange for state funding through the Minimum Foundation Program (Gonzales, 2011).

The Minimum Foundation Program is a state program which allocates state funds to schools. The Seventy Percent (70%) Instructional Requirement mandates that in order to receive these funds, at least 70% of the school's budget must be spent on instruction and administration ("Minimum Foundation Program," n.d.). NOECS failed to meet this requirement in 2009-10 and 2010-11 to which Kristin attributed this to Edison's management fees. At the end of the meeting, a parent noted that she was "worried that financial problems would force the school to close, ("Minimum Foundation Program," n.d.)" to which NOECS Board President Carrie replied, "[NOECS] has sufficient funds and that the board was doing everything possible to ensure the school's continued operation ("Minimum Foundation Program," n.d.)."

At the NOECS Board meeting on January 19, 2012, the Board members informed everyone that the school had broken its ties with EdisonLearning and that their post-Edison education and financial plans were approved by both the Recovery School District (RSD) and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) (Gonzales, 2012). The NOECS Board introduced Terry, its own finance director, as the previous financial director had been an employee of Edison.

Citing an audit report, NOECS Board member Joseph noted that EdisonLearning had not yet filed a lawsuit against the school for not paying its fees, despite threatening to do so. Joseph also noted that after examining last year's audit report, it was found that EdisonLearning had been "charging a management fee to handle federal grants, a practice that is not allowed (Gonzales, 2012)."

The two other charter schools in Louisiana ran by EdisonLearning also faced financial problems around this time period. Alan Westcott Charter School, also located in New Orleans, operated under a \$410,824 deficit for the 2011-2012 school year (Williams, 2013). Like NOECS, the board members of Alan Westcott Charter School also blamed their school's financial issues on EdisonLearning's management fee, which was more than \$500,000 per year, and ended their relationship with EdisonLearning in 2012 (Williams, 2013). Baton Rouge Charter High School, located in Baton Rouge, fired EdisonLearning in 2011 when faced a budget deficit "between \$400,000 and \$600,000," (Lussier, 2011).

This section detailed the turning point in the media portrayal of the NOECS. While previously portrayed as a successful school, the events in this section contributed to the shift, where moving forward the media's portrayal of the school turned negative. The revelation that a convicted felon was working at NOECS damaged its reputation with parents and the community, while the break with EdisonLearning brought in doubts about the school's chances for success.



## **Media Narratives: The End (2012-2013)**

After the break with EdisonLearning, many wondered whether or not the school would continue to stay open. The Board and faculty worked diligently to provide the State its post-Edison plans, which were approved. Although the break with Edison was needed, many of the other issues plaguing the school remained unresolved.

### **Another Principal Fired- “I’m sorry that it didn’t work out.”**

Nearing the conclusion of the May 24, 2012 Board meeting at the end of the fourth school year, NOECS Board secretary Kristin read the following statement,

At a special meeting held by the NOECS Board on April 19, 2012, after considering the needs of the New Orleans East Charter School, the board voted with a quorum, not to renew Principal Darlene’s contract for the 2012-2013 school year (Krall, 2012).

Principal Darlene, visibly embarrassed and angered replied

I hope whoever the board puts in place to be the administrator of the school, will get leadership support from this board...I have never worked in an environment where I was not evaluated. I would hope next year, the board pays more attention, and gives more support to the principal and the person in charge of fiscal management. This has not been an equitable experience... Everybody has opinions, but they

have not come into the school, or been a part of this environment When I hear stuff from parents, things being said about the school, or that they hear the school is getting rid of me as principal at a VIET function that happens on the weekends, I really don't appreciate that (Krall, 2012).

NOECS Board Chair Carrie responded, "While some of the things you said are not true, we're not going to fight about that. Good luck with your future and I'm sorry that it didn't work out."

I, along with a few other teachers attended this contentious meeting. Despite our differing opinions of Principal Darlene, we all felt that it was inappropriate for the Board to openly fire her at this time and place as the board meetings were open to the public and were often attended by parents and students.

The firing of two principals in such a short amount of time was not kindly looked upon by parents and did not help the school's image. Some parents posted online reviews and comments which criticized the high turnover rate of principals and staff, along with highlighting other problems at NOECS ("Convicted Felon employed," 2010; "NOECS," 2012).

### **Charter Revoked and School Takeover- "The failed NOECS"**

In December 2012, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) voted to revoke NOCES's charter, effectively closing it at the conclusion of the 2012-13 school year. An online news article cited "poor academic performance" as the reason for the decision (Dreilinger, 2012). Another online news

article noted that NOECS's "failing" School Performance Score (SPS) was 72.7, which fell short of the 75 SPS mandated by BESE (Harden, 2012). An online article in the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper elaborated on the State Board's decision

The decision to close a school is based on data, most critically test scores. In order to stay in business, a new charter school must either meet certain academic standards or show significant improvement in student achievement in its first three years..."Ending a charter is hard for everyone," said Caroline Roemer Shirley, executive director of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools. "These operators are good folks that have worked very hard," she said, but "we live and die by an accountability system (Dreilinger, 2012)."

The quotes in the article reflect many aspects of neoliberal ideology. We see the competitive business-like nature of the charter school movement where winners are able "to stay in business" and losers are closed. An accountability system for schools based on standardized test scores often results in "narrowing [of] the curriculum" and "teaching to the test (Ravitch, 2014, p.111-112)." From this point forward, media narratives began describing NOECS as the "failing" and/or "failed" school (Dreilinger, 2012; "Evanstone Charter Applauded," 2014; The Advocate, 2015).

The decision to close NOECS along with two other schools in the New Orleans East community was questioned and criticized. An Op-Ed column in the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper described the challenges NOECS faced

[In the beginning] the state Department of Education strong-armed the charter board into partnering with Edison Schools, a for-profit education management organization. Two years later, when Edison Schools proved unaffordable, Intercultural struggled to regain its financial footing. The Department of Education never intervened or offered a life preserver (Cohen, 2012).

The author implored that the New Orleans East community need[s] less ideological fervor from the state and more compassion. Less free market fundamentalism and more pragmatism. Less "benign neglect" and more technical support, particularly when it comes to serving students at struggling schools. Letting these schools hit rock bottom so that they can one day be taken over by fashionable charter organizations has led to the sacrifice of thousands of children's educations (Cohen, 2012).

Another online news source interviewed a community member and former NOECS employee who noted "the RSD did not provide any support...they were waiting for NOECS to fail — they were literally waiting for it to drown (Harden, 2013)."

In February 2013, the State approved the takeover of NOECS by Evanstone Charter, which ran a charter school in the same community, effective for the following school year (2013-14). An online news article reported that Evanstone

Charter was awarded a one-million dollar grant “to turnaround the academically unacceptable school (NOECS) (Harden, 2013).”

Local news outlets in the New Orleans covered the story. One reported “all current NOECS students will have guaranteed seats (“RSD makes changes,” 2013).” following the takeover. While the students at NOECS were guaranteed admission for the following year, the staff’s employment status was not guaranteed. Another local news outlet mentioned “all NOECS employees will have the opportunity to apply for jobs with Evanstone Charter (Harden, 2013).”

May 24, 2013 was the last school day at NOECS and a special event was held to commemorate the school (Johnston, 2013). At the board meeting following the event, NOECS Board Secretary Krisitin reflected

[We] had suffered from severe leadership problems in previous years that led to a divisive atmosphere and numerous staff resignations...

Principal Reeves reorganized the school and affected change from day one (Johnston, 2013).

While NOECS Board Chair Carrie lamented, “This is the year when things start[ed] going smoothly, and we just don’t have the opportunity to continue,”

Andrew, Vice Chair of the NOECS Board

praised the school’s staff for teaching students to interact with other cultures, and to resolve conflict without violence. He said he was moved by how tight the employees were. “A few of them came up to me and said, ‘This school changed my life.’ (Johnston, 2013).”

These comments by the Vice Chair of the NOECS Board illustrate the differing views of school “success” and school “failure.” The accountability movement under federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTP), and the current Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) measures success and failure by student and school performance on standardized tests. Schools that are able to meet and/or exceed the established School Performance Score (SPS) are rewarded while those who fail to are punished by cuts in funding or threats of closure. The charter school movement in post-Katrina New Orleans has allowed private entities such as EdisonLearning access to taxpayer money that would normally go to public schools and to gain profit for their shareholders. The NOECS Board, however, wanted the school to go beyond test scores, to address the larger social issues that impacted the community, i.e. “teaching students to interact with other cultures,” and “to resolve conflict without violence.” This vision reflects Elder’s (2010) belief that schools can bring communities together and serve as a “hub” for community activism, but under the current conditions, these broader social goals conflict with the dominance of standardized testing in our schools.

This section presented and analyzed the media narratives about the closure and takeover of NOECS. Although most documents around this time negatively portrayed the school as “failing” and/or “failed,” thus deserving to be shut down, there were, however, some media articles which supported the school and wanted it to remain open. The section closes by describing the ceremony held on the last of NOECS’s existence.

## **Teacher Participant Profiles**

Before moving on to the teacher narratives, this section briefly describes the participants and is organized in two parts. The first part consists of NOECS employees with “insider” status, meaning those who are from New Orleans and/or taught there prior to Hurricane Katrina. The second part consists of NOCES employees with “outsider” status, meaning those who moved to New Orleans *after* Hurricane Katrina. It is important to differentiate between this, along with noting their race and experience level, as all these may play a role in how they perceive and describe their experiences working in New Orleans and at the school.

### **Insiders- From New Orleans and/or taught in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina**

Anita is a young African-American female who grew up in New Orleans East. She taught 2 years in Houston, TX during Katrina and returned to New Orleans after the storm to teach 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades at NOECS. She is currently teaching in Houston.

Ross is an older white male who has lived in New Orleans his entire life. He taught in Orleans Parish public schools prior to Hurricane Katrina and at numerous charter schools after. He taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at NOECS. He is currently in his 20<sup>th</sup> year teaching.

Eric is a middle-aged African-American male who has lived in New Orleans for most of his life. He taught in Orleans Parish public schools for 5 years before Hurricane Katrina and for 5 years after the storm at numerous charter schools. He taught 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at NOECS. In 2013, he was called to active military duty and is currently serving overseas.

Perry is a young Asian-American male who grew up in New Orleans East. He had no prior teaching experience and worked as a Reading Interventionist at NOECS. He is currently a middle school counselor.

Derrick is an older white male who has lived in New Orleans his entire life. He taught in Orleans Public schools prior to Hurricane Katrina and at numerous charter schools afterwards. He is currently in his 21<sup>st</sup> year of teaching and working for Jefferson Parish public schools.

### **Outsiders- Moved to New Orleans to teach after Hurricane Katrina**

Sara is a middle-aged African-American female from Baton Rouge, LA. She taught in Baton Rouge for 15 years before moving to New Orleans in order to be closer to her family. She taught 4<sup>th</sup> grade at NOECS. She is currently teaching in Baton Rouge.



Eileen is a young white female who moved to New Orleans after graduating to teach at NOECS because she was captivated by the school's mission. She was the ELL teacher at NOECS which was her first full-time teaching position. She is currently teaching in North Carolina.

Victoria is a young white female who moved to New Orleans after leaving the Peace Corp. She taught 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades at NOECS which was her first full-time teaching position. She is currently teaching in Mississippi.

Lisa is a young African-American female who moved to New Orleans after graduating to be with her then- fiancée. She taught Kindergarten at NOECS which was her first full-time teaching position. She is currently teaching in San Antonio, TX.

Lucy is a middle-aged white female from Alabama. She taught in Alabama for 8 years before moving to New Orleans to be close to family. She taught 4<sup>th</sup> grade at NOECS and was promoted to Assistant Principal. She is currently Assistant Principal at a charter school in New Orleans.

Beverly is a middle-aged African-American female from Kansas City. She taught there for 8 years before moving to New Orleans at her principal's request.

She taught 1<sup>st</sup> grade at NOECS. She is currently an administrator at an Orleans Parish public school.

Jessica is a middle-aged African-American female from Maryland. She taught in Maryland for 5 years with Edison Learning before moving to New Orleans to take a promotion within the company. She was the Curriculum Coordinator at NOECS. She is currently a Special Education Coordinator in Maryland.

Yvonne is a young white female from Massachusetts. She attended college in New Orleans and went through the Teach for America program. She was a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher at NOECS which was her first full-time teaching position. She is no longer working in the field of education.

(Myself) I am a young Asian-American male who grew up in Houston, TX. I taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at NOECS which was my first full-time teaching position. I am currently working on my Ph.D at Penn State.

These were brief profiles of the participants in the study. As detailed in the Methods section, the participants represented a diverse range of experience level, races, and insider/outsider status. In the following section, these teachers will share their experiences working at NOECS.

## **Teacher Narratives: The Optimistic Beginning (2008-2009)**

### **School Mission- "A wonderful vision"**

Most teachers agreed that the school's concept and mission was important and much needed for the community. Jessica and Yvonne spoke of the school as a metaphorical "bridge" between the diverse cultures present in the community. Jessica, an experienced African-American teacher with outsider status, elaborated as to why this was an important part of the school's mission,

[Father Vincent] wanted to build a bridge between the African-American community and the Vietnamese community- obviously there had been some problems in the past and he was trying to bridge that gap and just kind of bring a little bit of harmony into it.

This is an example of the view that a school's role in the community can go beyond education; that it can bring a community together and be a "hub" for community activism which would help revitalize and empower high-poverty neighborhoods (Elder, 2010).

Sara, an experienced African-American teacher who had taught in Baton Rouge for 15 years prior to NOECS, described the school's focus on diversity and culture as "unique...a wonderful vision...[and] what made it different." On working with a diverse student population, Sara commented "I really didn't chose to work with students of these ethnicities, but doing so proved to be very rewarding. I learned so much from the students about their cultures."

NOECS's focus on diversity and culture was the main reason Victoria, a white teacher with less experience and outsider status, chose to move to New Orleans and teach at NOECS. It also played an important role for Beverly when she chose to enroll her daughter as a student,

I loved the idea of the Vietnamese and African American students in one school learning about each other...I loved that my daughter and I were getting to know different people and being immersed in the culture...

I believed it was an awesome concept that was beneficial for New Orleans. My experience aligns with these teachers' experiences. I thought it was a great idea to use the school in order to bring together a diverse community after Katrina. I remember there was a lot of excitement in the beginning from the community and faculty because there was a sense that we were doing something unique and potentially great.

### **Edison Schools- "Helpful in the Beginning"**

Teachers noted that EdisonLearning was helpful in the beginning. Lucy, an experienced white teacher with outsider status, commented "EdisonLearning did a good job coordinating the school opening to ensure that we had most all of what we needed." Anita, an African-American teacher with less experience and insider status, described the EdisonLearning representatives at NOECS as "knowledgeable" while Beverly, an experienced African-American teacher with outsider status, commented that the representatives were "honestly about helping the school succeed."

My experiences were similar to the previous teachers. EdisonLearning did a good job of helping us get the school up and running. Their representatives provided teachers with professional development training before the school year started and maintained visible presence once the school year began. I remember multiple EdisonLearning representatives visiting my classroom, observing my teaching, and providing feedback- all of which were very helpful for a first-year teacher. The most significant example was the Edison curriculum specialist who helped me set up literacy centers in my classroom. The students enjoyed working together at the different centers and it afforded me the opportunity to work with my students individually or in small groups. However, as the years went by, Edison's presence at NOECS significantly decreased.

In this section, the teacher narratives closely mirrored the media narratives as both presented the founding and opening of the school in an optimistic and hopeful tone. This would quickly change, as the next details the problems and issues the teachers faced at NOECS, which were largely ignored by the media.

## **Teacher Narratives: Problems Arise (2010-2012)**

### **Early Challenges and Move- "That's not really a school now is it?"**

Despite having a large percentage of the staff being less experienced and/or having outsider status (having moved to New Orleans *after* Katrina), everyone worked long and hard to ensure that the school opening went as smoothly as possible. An early challenge for NOECS was just trying to convince parents to enroll

their children to attend the brand new school. Ross, an experienced white teacher with insider status, recalled, "First thing that went wrong is the hope and promise of the Vietnamese community supporting this new community school through enrollment- [it] did not materialize."

The Board had anticipated that a majority of the student population at NOECS would come from the immediate community. When that did not occur, they had to go to other communities and parts of the city to find students to fill the seats at the school. "I remember knocking on doors and passing out flyers to recruit students so we would meet enrollment numbers," recalled Anita. Ross also remembered having to go out on foot trying to convince parents to enroll their children at NOECS. He commented "We had to go all over the city trying to get students in order to get enrollment filled which in turn brought a lot of logistical problems."

Because charter schools are autonomous entities independent of district control, they are individually responsible for providing services such as transportation and food. These were also major challenges for NOECS. By accepting and enrolling students from all over the city, it was the school's responsibility to provide bus service. At first NOECS contracted more "budget-friendly" companies to provide transportation. This quickly turned into a disaster as the drivers were not familiar with their routes, which were very complicated and inconvenient. Ross described the problem

The system of bus delivery was chaotic for the first month and a half.

Buses could not pick up on time, they could not drop off on time. We fired one bus company and had to replace them with another.

Teachers were having to ride the bus...so it was a disaster.

While school hours were 8AM-4PM, some students were required to be at their bus stops before 6AM and were dropped off after 7PM. The long bus rides upset many parents. Eileen recalled, “[I was] cussed at by a parent when I rode on the bus the first week of school so I could help the driver navigate the route and dropped off their child at 7:15PM.”

Food service was another challenge for NOECS. Perry recalled, “The lunches were terrible. Kids had to eat boxed lunches, so I’m like, ‘You’re not feeding these kids properly.’” Because the school’s original location on the premise of the New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church did not have a cafeteria kitchen to prepare food, for the first few months we had to purchase boxed meals for breakfast and lunch. Again, parents were upset that the school was not able to provide hot meals for the students. NOECS then contracted a food service company to cook hot meals off-site, then deliver the food to our school, and serve the students.

The news article about the school had a positive tone and did not detail the problems with NOECS’s first location and subsequent move to a “new” site. The teachers’ experiences were vastly different in tone than what was portrayed in the media article and their narratives provide a more thorough and detailed account of

these topics. About operating on the premises of the New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church, Veronica commented,

We were in a small [church] building before getting moved to the trailer campus...it was very stressful teaching so many students with high needs in a very small space. This place also didn't have a proper cafeteria or gym, and was shared with a local church community, so if it was very hot or raining, we had extra issues.

Ross also had complaints about the school facilities and discussed other challenges of working on the premises of New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church,

It was confining and I remember there was just one boy's bathroom... and it was just a mess, you couldn't keep it clean, it was rank, it stank and I'd never been in a situation where there wasn't an adult bathroom... I wasn't told about this, I wasn't told we were going to be in a makeshift building, in fact I was kind of promised we'd be in a nice new building.



Figure 8-1. First NOECS school site at New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church.



Similarly, Perry was also critical of the school's original location,

The building was terrible, I mean if they had this vision of a school then they could have at least have a suitable building for the kids... you know they didn't have the facilities to provide- you know they're selling the parents on this idea but they couldn't deliver. There was like this office- classroom behind the stage at the church and I was given a little corner in the hallway so you know that was difficult.

I too, felt that it was very difficult operating in the school's original location on the premises of New Orleans Vietnamese Catholic Church. The school building itself was sufficient in that each grade-level teacher had their own adequately-sized classroom. However, the Special Ed and ELL teachers did not have a classroom and had to provide services to their students in the hallway. The Art and World Language teachers also did not have a classroom and instead "floated" to each grade-level classroom. Students had PE and recess outside in the parking lot and/or under the covered pavilion. The covered pavilion also served as an assembly area and cafeteria where the students ate breakfast and lunch every day until the winter, when breakfast and lunch was moved inside to their classroom. Being at this location for the first year and a half was extremely challenging and everyone was excited that we would be moving to a "new" site in October of the second year (2009-2010).



Figure 9-1. Covered pavilion used as lunch room, assembly area, and playground.

The “new” site for NOECS was a campus of modular buildings behind Samantha Robert High School in the same neighborhood. Moving mid-year was not easy for the teachers. Yvonne described the move as “disruptive” and Derrick commented that it was “challenging.” There were many issues with running a school at this location too. While the “new” site afforded us much more space and included a playground, library, and cafeteria for the students, it was older and used which led to more problems and was expensive to maintain. Veronica discussed her experiences with the “new” school site,

Eventually we moved to a campus of trailers connected with wooden walk-ways, but these trailers were old and had rotting floors. I still remember having to try and cover up the plywood on my floor with rugs because a student’s chair leg fell through the rotting floor and it was fixed by nailing plywood over it.



Figure 10-1. Covering hole in Veronica's classroom floor.

Aside from the problems Veronica mentioned, other issues with the “new” school site included faulty air conditioning units, telephone system, and internet access. I remember myself and other teachers being given box fans for our classrooms when the air conditioning units failed and could not be repaired in a timely manner. It was very difficult for teachers and students in that situation with the heat and humidity in New Orleans. The average temperature at the beginning of the school year in August is 90 degrees Fahrenheit and 85 degrees Fahrenheit at the end of the school year in May, but the temperature regularly got much higher ([www.neworleansonline.com/tools/weather2.html](http://www.neworleansonline.com/tools/weather2.html)).

There were also incidents of vandalism and burglary during my time at NOECS. Classroom windows were broken on multiple occasions by thrown rocks.

Our building was also broken into one night and our classrooms were ransacked. School laptops and teachers' personal belongings were stolen. The constant maintenance and repairs became a burden for the school's finances. At an NOECS Board meeting, Board member Jerome commented, "The cost of upkeep to this facility has strained our budget." The Board then voted to accept a fifty-thousand dollar loan to help pay for repairs to the school facilities.

Eric, an experienced African-American teacher with insider status commented, "Those trailers had a 5-year life-span but it's probably 10 years that the trailers been up and they still using them." Derrick accurately summed up the issues with our "new" location, "The fact that the building where we were [at] was kinda makeshift you know? I mean that's calling a bunch of portables thrown together a school, that's not really a school, now is it?"



Figure 11-1. NOECS campus comprised of modular buildings.

### **Partnership with Edison Learning - “A huge waste of money”**

The teacher narratives do not agree with, but rather countered the statements from the news articles written about Edison Learning/Edison Schools. The teachers were overwhelmingly negative and critical of NOECS’s partnering with Edison. Rather than “[being] on the right track” or “doing just fine”, Eileen described NOECS as “a chaotic place with terrible school culture”, “a terrible place to work”, and “a pretty negative environment.” She calls the school operations manager, test coordinator, and principal “incompetent” and refers to Edison as “basically the devil” because

They got us in debt to them and didn’t offer any true support. They were a joke. We were very far out of compliance in terms of our Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students for the first three months I was there while I waited on Edison to train me. I mean we were not adhering to the law because I had no clue what I was doing. I finally found someone from the Recovery School District (RSD) who trained me and got me up to speed, even though Edison was supposed to be doing that, and we got compliant. It is pretty pathetic that they did not even train me in the basics of what the law required for LEP students.

Eileen’s comments align with findings from the court case *P.B. v. Pastorek*, which revealed many instances of RSD charter schools not being in compliance with or outright violating state and/or federal laws. In August 2013, the New Orleans-

based community organization VAYLA (the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association) along with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) filed a complaint to the Department of Justice on behalf of ten families (21 students total) accusing OPSB and RSD charter schools (four schools including NOECS) of violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The document details examples of how the schools did not meet the needs of the Limited-English Proficiency (LEP) students and thus “severely damaging their quality of education and putting them at a huge disadvantage to attaining success in their schools (“Groups File DOJ Complaint,” 2013).”

Some teachers discussed Edison’s for-profit nature and their disappointment that the Board had hired Edison to manage NOECS. According to Victoria,

Edison Learning was a huge waste of money, and did not provide the resources that they claimed they were going to...For-profit companies should not be running schools. It was a business, and they failed to provide for the school.”

Lisa expressed a similar view, “Edison was not invested in the school and was more interested in getting a return on their so-called investment monetarily”. Ross was also critical of Edison,

Edison was always trying to cut corners...They were focused on profit, and profit to the exclusion of uh, really making decisions that benefitted the kids, they were just going to cut corners in every way that they could- to make profit.”

When discussing the incident with Helen, the convicted felon working at NOECS, Perry viewed it as a major turning point for the school, "I think that [incident] opened the door for people to start complaining...That's when the school kinda went south." He also mentioned that the incident also negatively impacted some teachers' view of the school:

It was also like let me distance myself from this school because I'm not going to support it, I'm just going to start talking bad about the school. They would start making comments [like] "Whoa, I don't want anything to do with this", it became a free-for-all.

Public perception of NOECS was also severely damaged. Lucy added that there was no attempt to win back the community's trust after the incident

We just did not do a great job of public PR...There needed to be better damage control...There was no one with a strong sense of advertising and PR work as their area of expertise to spin our story.

Not only was the school's reputation marred by the report, but NOECS also lost the community's trust and support as parents withdrew their children from the school. The community's optimism and belief that this school could be successful and deliver on its promises and goals seemingly vanished after the news story about Helen's crime. The community may have viewed this incident as a continuation of the corruption within New Orleans' school system that had existed prior to Hurricane Katrina.

**Principal Fired- “I think she’s a bad principal”**

The NOECS board decided to fire Principal Patricia in the middle of the third year (2010-11) and promoted both Lucy and Kathy to the position of co-vice principals for the remainder of the school year. Many teachers felt that Principal Patricia’s firing was warranted and that many problems at NOECS were the result of her inexperience. Anita had some of the harshest criticisms about the school’s first principal

I believe that the lack of leadership under our founding principal set the school on a negative course...Patricia never should have been the principal of NOECS. I believe that she was a closeted racist and did not have the best interests of students, staff and community in mind while making decisions.

Eileen described Principal Patricia as “incompetent...had no clue...[and] blamed the teachers,” while Beverly similarly commented that Patricia “should never have been given a school...she didn’t treat [staff] right or know what she was doing.”

On Principal Patricia’s treatment of her staff, Derrick mentioned an incident where Principal Patricia accused him of letting his students damage school windows without having any proof. He noted, “Staff morale was low because she would beat you down on things...I don’t have a whole lot of respect for her, I really don’t, I think she’s a bad principal.”

Jessica also commented on Patricia’s lack of experience, “She wasn’t ready to be a principal...especially in a startup school.” Similarly, Ross noted, “The leadership



was absent...So coming into this situation, she virtually had no [experience], she's opening up a brand new school from ground up with zero experience basically."

Victoria stated, "I believe [Patricia] did a poor job of running the school and supporting [the] staff...[which] caused a lot of negatives for teachers and students."

Lucy gave a different perspective on Principal Patricia's struggles, "I think that she was not given much initial support/training so she was overwhelmed" but also mentioned that the firing was "warranted." Perry was the only participant (besides myself) who did not criticize or blame Principal Patricia noting, "My experiences with her were always positive." My experiences with Principal Patricia were mostly positive. As a less-experienced teacher, Principal Patricia was very helpful in my professional development and growth as a teacher and always made time to meet with me. However, I did notice that she was not this accommodating to all her teachers. She gave more freedom and leeway to teachers that were able to "get results" and was more critical to those who struggled. This is similar to Derrick's view that she negatively impacted teacher morale. Because of her lack of experience as an administrator, Patricia tended to delegate responsibilities and asked for faculty input before making decisions. While some saw this as being "indecisive," I thought it was rather democratic.

**New Principal- “I don’t understand why they would invite that cancer into NOECS”**

Going into the fourth year (2011-12) there was hope that the Board would promote from within and name either Lucy or Kathy as principal because both were familiar with the culture and problems at NOECS and would therefore be more capable of “righting the ship.” Instead, the Board made what the teachers considered a questionable decision and chose to hire Darlene, who was principal of nearby Revere Elementary School which had been recently closed down by the State.

Victoria was critical of this decision,

The school board hired [Darlene] with only THREE interview of candidates and no second interviews. I was present, so I know this.

The 3 candidates were 2 principals from a school that had been shut down for failing, and one with no experience working with our population of students, who was one year from wanting to retire.

They waited months before even bothering to conduct interview for principal, and then hastily chose a principal from a failing school with a record of issues with students mistreatment that was easily found by a simple google search of her name.

Eric noted that while, “She was good to me”, Darlene was “disliked by the rest of the staff.” He also stated that Darlene lacked “strong leadership” as “some things went undone.”

At first I too, was critical of the NOECS Board's decision to hire Darlene as principal as she was an "outsider" who was not familiar the culture, students, and faculty at our school. However, by the time the school year ended, I felt that she came into a challenging situation and did her best to help the school. Her leadership style probably rubbed some people the wrong way. Unlike the previous principal, Darlene tended to make decisions with little or no input from others. She had a "no excuses" approach and was more demanding of the teachers to "get results" without taking into consideration issues or factors that could hinder student progress. Another matter was her tending to be too reactive and not addressing problems until it got out of control. NOECS was adding a new grade each year and by this time had grown to a PK-8 school. We were not ready to add the junior high grades and this led to numerous problems. On this topic Lucy commented

We grew SO fast. Opening K-5 and adding a grade each year was tough as we branched into middle school early on. It was a huge challenge as our school culture was not solid and set. Middle school was a different animal on the same campus and there should have been some more supports around middle school development and growth.

Eric bluntly described the problems, "That junior high it was something else, I'll tell you that...they was cuttin' up." He also added that the middle school teachers lacked "behavioral management skills" to handle the problems and Principal Darlene didn't make the "tough decisions...[that] would have been better for the school." As an example of the problems with the junior high, Eileen recalled

“catching [junior high] students having sex in an empty room and having to translate that conversation to the Spanish speaking parent.” Other teachers described the junior high as “out of control” and “little learning took place.”

I also felt that we were not prepared both staff-wise and facility-wise to have the junior high grade levels at NOECS. There was little to no support for the junior high teachers and some of them seemingly “gave up.” I remember having a conversation with assistant principal Debbie in December 2012 where she told me that she had to fire a popular 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher for basically not doing their job. The school was not able to provide extracurricular activities such as sports, band, etc. which are an important part of the junior high experience.

Aside from making questionable decisions, many teachers felt that the NOECS Board was too “idealistic” and not prepared to govern the new school. For example, Eileen asserted

[The Board members] were either community members that didn’t know a whole lot about education or were from Tulane and weren’t really in touch with the reality of actual school governance. New Orleans at that time was highly competitive for students and talent and our school board wasn’t cutthroat enough to survive.

Similarly, Victoria commented

The school board was well meaning, but lacked the proper knowledge of running a school to properly put in place systems, administration, or resources that were very much needed for the school to survive.

This section detailed the many challenges and problems the teachers encountered at NOECS from 2010-2012. While the move to a “new” school site and facility were portrayed positively in the media narratives, the teacher narratives proved otherwise. The teachers found that moving mid-year was “disruptive” and “challenging,” and that the location had many problems too. Also during this period, EdisonLearning became less visible at the school and did not provide much help for the staff as they had previously. Major events included the firing of Principal Patricia and the hiring of Principal Darlene, to which the teachers had differing opinions of. While some were optimistic that the NOECS Board and new administration would be able to fix the issues plaguing the school at this time in order to “turn things around,” the worst was yet to come.

## **Teacher Narratives: The End (2012-2013)**

### **Other Challenges- “They overworked the teachers”**

The 2011-2012 school year would be my last at NOECS as I would move on to work on my Ph.D at Penn State afterwards. Another problem was the high turnover rate of faculty members and teachers. At the end of the 2008-2009 school year (the school’s first year) 25% of the staff either chose not to return or did not have their contracts renewed. At the end of the 2010-2011 school year (the school’s third year in existence) almost 55% of the staff chose not to return or did not have their contracts renewed. At the end of the 2009-2010 (the school’s second year), and 2011-2012 (the school’s fourth year) school year, around 33% of the staff chose not

to return or did not have their contracts renewed.

Lucy commented on the high rate of staff turnover there was no plan or investment in training/supporting/retaining new teachers and many left to find opportunities that provided such... this created several years with high teacher turnover and our school culture was watered down and lost.

Beverly blamed the high turnover rate on a lack of “true leadership” which “took a toll on the staff...many of the founding teachers left after the second year.” She added that many teachers left because they were not treated “right”. Similarly, Lisa mentions “not always treated appropriately” and “not backed up when it came to student/parent issues” as reasons that led to her leaving NOECS.

Perry commented that the specials teachers in his building felt “overworked” and “weren’t respected [by] the principal...and the regular teachers”. Victoria stated “The faculty worked hard, and many were so disheartened by what they experienced at NOECS, that they left the field of teaching and education all together.”

Some teachers discussed the workload and stress working at NOECS. Yvonne left after two and a half years because she “felt burned out- tired!” Veronica commented that it was “incredibly stressful” working at NOECS, and that “I would often stay late, work weekends, and apply for online grants to get much needed resources for my students. Lucy recalled providing after-school tutorials and working from 6:30AM until 6:00PM.

Lisa, who left after the first year, stated

I felt that the workload was too much. Especially when it came to the goals we were supposed to be meeting school wide. It felt like since it was a brand new school and many people were trying to turn around a failing school system in a place known for having a horrible education system, a lot of unrealistic expectations were placed on teachers and staff to perform. We did not have all the resources necessary to help students

According to Anita,

The pressure from the onset was intense...Charters are very different from traditional schools because the school is essentially its own district. There were demands placed on teachers to complete tasks outside of work hours. The threat that you were an at-will employee was deployed to force compliance.

Similarly, Derrick noted that at NOECS "They overworked the teachers, not only hard but long hours...they had no respect for the teachers." He contrasted this to working in the New Orleans Public School System prior to Katrina, "we always worked under the union contracts so there was only so much they could [do]...we had rights, they had to respect the teachers."

The school's mission of celebrating and respecting diverse cultures created problems too. Sara noted difficulty with

Finding a balance between the cultures, not placing too much emphasis

on one over the other...Another challenge that I found somewhat frustrating were the language barriers between some of the student/parents and teacher.

Similarly, Anita described the challenge as a “balancing act” in addressing the “expressed desires” of the Vietnamese, African-American, and Hispanic populations. Jessica was critical that “all the activities we had centered around the Vietnamese aspect and it didn’t do anything to bring the African-Americans in.”

Lucy recalled racial tensions between her students which resulted fights. Eileen and Beverly noted that language barriers made it difficult to contact parents and to build parent relationships. Lisa felt that it would have been beneficial for teachers at NOECS to receive training to help “understand the community we were teaching.” Derrick mentioned that being a white male working with a student population that was 100% minority was difficult because the students didn’t listen to or respect him as much as faculty members who were African-American.

### **School Closure and Reflections**

The media narratives surrounding the closing and takeover of NOECS were solely focused on the school’s “poor” performance on the state LEAP and iLEAP tests and portrayed the school as “failing” or “failed.” Although some teachers did mention “test scores” when discussing the topic of the school’s closure and takeover, many instead chose to talk about the time and effort it took to after Katrina to open and run the school. According to Jessica, “it’s just so unfortunate because a lot of work went into putting that school together, it was definitely a team effort...at the



beginning the culture was really good, everybody was bonding together.”

Similarly, Beverly noted

That was the adventure to opening a new school, things weren’t going to be perfect but we as teachers would make it work. I hate that the school closed, I believed it was an awesome concept that was beneficial for New Orleans.

I have similar feelings as Jessica and Beverly about NOECS’s closure and takeover. It is unfortunate that the school did not succeed because so much time, effort, and sacrifice was put into NOECS. Most teachers were very dedicated and worked extremely hard. I came in early and left late every day. I did not miss a single day during the four years I worked at NOECS. We represented our school and volunteered for community events on weekends. Working with a predominantly poor population, we regularly bought supplies for our students. An informal conversation with a Board member revealed that when funds were low prior to the school’s opening, he personally paid over 150 thousand dollars in order to complete the school’s renovations.

Eric was critical of the State’s decision to revoke NOECS’s charter

That was just political...because I know there was schools that did a lot worse than what NOECS did and kept their charter...but the thing is you can’t put unreasonable demands on us then when they not met [revoke the charter]. [The State] was looking at what we didn’t do and didn’t take into account [our successes] ...That school definitely

should not have lost its charter. I think that school was really doing a good service.

When NOECS opened in 2008, the State was using a 200-point scale to score each school's SPS (School Performance Score), where 64 and below was seen as "failing" and 65 and above as "passing." Based on this scale, NOECS was seen as a "passing" school with SPS scores increasing every year. For the 2012-2013 school year, the State modified its scoring system to a 150-points scale where 74 and below was now "failing" and 75 and above was now "passing." Like Eric, many viewed this as a solely political move to designate more schools as "failing," thus able to be taken over. This arbitrary change severely hurt NOECS. Once labeled as a "failing" school, we lost a large number of our high-achieving students as their parents withdrew them from the school.

Many teachers talked positively about the relationships they developed with their fellow co-workers. As Sara described it, "We were a close-knit family that I thoroughly enjoyed working with... [the closing] was bittersweet, I loved teaching at NOECS."

Similar to Sara, Lisa also mentioned "family" when discussing this topic, "I loved all the teachers at NOECS. We were founding a school together and we all got a long for the most part. They became my family and if they did good I felt we all did good. I still think fondly of that first year at NOECS and the teachers who opened that school. We set into place many of the policies that were to be used and set many of the

traditions that would help shape what happened at the school.

Yvonne mentioned that during her time at NOECS she became good friends with some of the other teachers while Derrick commented, “I really liked the other teachers, I realized they were all good teachers, they were good people.”

I, too, developed many long-lasting relationships with other faculty members at NOECS. There definitely was a family-like atmosphere among (most of) the staff. We celebrated birthdays and holidays together. We celebrated each other’s personal and professional successes. We supported one another through tough times and tragedies. Like myself, many came from other states because they wanted to help the community post-Katrina. I worked with many dedicated individuals who put the needs of our students ahead of their own. I still keep in touch with many of my former co-workers and visit them when possible.

Most teachers described their time at NOECS as a “learning experience” and that having to face the various challenges at the school, they were able to develop as teachers. Victoria reflected on her time at NOECS

Overall, I’m grateful for the experience, but I’m very happy to no longer be there...I learned a lot about teaching in a very short time due to necessity, and I know it made me a stronger teacher overall by having to overcome those challenges.

Similarly, Lisa commented, “I did develop a tough skin working at NOECS, and I believe because of that I am able to handle a lot of different teaching situations.”

Lucy comments also mirrored the “learning experience” theme

I would characterize my time at ICS as a time of great learning. I found the work as challenging as rewarding. I had never had a teaching position where I also held so many “other” responsibilities. It allowed me to gain confidence, try on new hats and assume some leadership roles that I may otherwise not have been able to have. I learned a lot of what NOT to do and that too has its place.

Eileen also reflected on her experiences at NOECS

All my NOECS experiences ended up helping me in my teaching now. The second school I worked at was a failing public school. I was able to withstand a lot of pressure and frustration with a much more positive attitude than a lot of teachers...The school I work at now is a high performing charter school. My experiences at NOECS help me appreciate all the work that I am required to do at my new school because I know that the structure is important to keep us from becoming like NOECS.

Like these teachers, I also view my time teaching at NOECS as a valuable “learning experience.” Coming in as a new teacher I had to face the unfamiliar challenges of working at a first-year urban school with a student population that was 100 percent minority and majority poor. I contemplated leaving mid-way through my first year and questioned my ability to teach at NOECS. As detailed earlier, with the support and guidance from Principal Patricia and the veteran teachers, I was able to develop

and grow in the subsequent years to become one of the more successful teachers at NOECS. Another important factor was my enrollment and completion of the Master's program in elementary education at Xavier University as I was able to learn and apply new teaching strategies in my classroom to better address my students' learning needs. The combination of teaching at NOECS and my education at Xavier have been very beneficial as I transitioned to teaching undergraduate literacy methods course at Penn State while working on my Ph.D.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Implications**

This narrative case study is focused on a single charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans- the school I formerly worked at. I designed and carried out this project seeking to explore the following questions: 1) How are school success and school failure defined in this context over time? 2) What are the experiences of teachers at this “failing” charter school? 3) How do teachers at this “failing” charter school describe their workload and pressures? 4) How can lessons from these teachers’ experiences be used to impact education reform?

Through analysis of teacher narratives and text analysis of documents, this case study presents the interesting “story” of a community coming together to open a charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans and gives teachers an opportunity to share their experiences. It also serves as a telling case whose implications include: 1) expanding notions of school success and school failure beyond student performance on standardized tests, to understand the larger social issues that impact poor communities and communities of color, 2) adding to the critique of privatization and for-profit charters, and 3) advocating for a “bottom-up” approach to education reform, in which teachers are involved in the decision-making process. This final chapter will reflect on my research questions in addition to detailing the implications.

## **Expanding Notions of School Success and School Failure**

My first research question asked, “How are school success and school failure defined in this context over time?” Notions of school success and failure in post-Katrina New Orleans continue to be based on SPS or “School Performance Score”, which measures their students’ performance on the state standardized tests known as the iLEAP (3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> grades) and LEAP (4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades). Schools failing to meet their SPS goal may be taken over by the State-run Recovery School District (RSD) or closed down. This is an example of “no excuse” accountability under NCLB and Race to the Top where schools and teachers are punished or rewarded for their students’ performance on standardized tests. Important factors such as poverty, class size, home support, access to resources, etc. are ignored and seen as “excuses” for failure.

Media narratives about schools in New Orleans tend to frame school success and failure in this manner. According to an online news article discussing charter school closure

The decision to close a school is based on data, most critically test scores.

In order to stay in business, a new charter school must either meet certain academic standards or show significant improvement in student achievement in its first three years (Dreilinger, 2012).

Another online news article discussed the State’s revocation of NOECS and other charter schools’ charter at the end of 2012

In each case, the schools lost their charters because of poor academic

performance, and will either be shut down or transition to new management at the end of the school year... "The bar and the standards keep going up," RSD superintendent Patrick Dobard said (Dreilinger, 2012).

Both of these media narratives reflect the neoliberal values and ideals within the charter school movement. Talking about schools in terms such as "in order to stay in business" and "will either be shut down or transition to new management" shows the extent neoliberalism has impacted the landscape of education in post-Katrina New Orleans. Under NCLB and Race to the Top, schools are forced to compete with each other for federal aid. This is a sharp turn from the federal government's traditional method of awarding federal money to public schools based on equity (need).

At the start, media narratives about the NOECS framed it as a successful school, not because of its SPS score, but rather because the school was intertwined with the community's return after Hurricane Katrina. Eventually, however, the media narratives changed to only focus on the school's SPS score and the school was portrayed as "failing."

Initially, the teachers' discussion of success and failure at NOECS was also focused on standardized testing and SPS. Talking about challenges and reasons for closure, Eileen commented "our test scores got worse and worse each year". Similarly, Anita answered "[our] test scores did not meet the state's expectations".



Likewise, Victoria remarked “the school grade was low, so there was constant pressure for students to perform well on the end of year state tests”.

The teachers then criticized the current system which defines school success and failure solely on standardized test scores. Eileen believes that this system “shames and punishes schools in poorer communities” and ignores larger societal issues which impacts our students. Heavy reliance on standardized testing “does not eliminate poverty or close achievement gaps (Ravitch, 2014, p. 225).”

Derrick thought it was “ridiculous” to punish schools “for not getting the scores.” Perry also took issue with the current system of punishing lower performing schools

Instead of shutting those [failing] schools down, why not give them the resources that they need? Why keep dumping money into your “A” schools? Why not help those lower schools out? We want to close the gap between the disadvantaged and advantaged.

This is similar to Ravitch’s (2014) view

There is nothing creative about closing a school that is a fixture in its community. If it is struggling, it needs help. It may need extra staff, extra resources, and expert supervision. It doesn’t need to be shuttered like a shoe store. No school was ever saved or improved by closing it. (p.305)

Yvonne stated that “root issues” are not being addressed. Similarly, Victoria commented

Education reformers cannot just look at academics if they want success

in these communities...They must address social, personal, and academic needs of all students, in order to provide the proper resources, or help families find necessary resources for all students to be successful.

The teachers overwhelmingly stated that poverty and violence are major obstacles for families in poorer communities. Victoria and Perry both cited examples of working with students who come to school hungry. Victoria asked “how can a student who is hurting from hunger be expected to focus on school work?”, while Perry commented “they are super hungry- I wouldn’t want to learn either.”

On violence, Yvonne commented “is huge issue within poorer communities and communities of color in N.O. I’m not sure of the statistics, but deaths relating to gun violence are disproportionate within these communities.” Eric noted that we cannot ignore the impact on students

Every single school in New Orleans have kids that have a direct relationship with somebody they either know in jail or violent crime victim...and so you can’t tell them “don’t think about it”, you can’t tell the kids “don’t react to it”, you can’t tell them “don’t have emotions about it”

Eric, an African-American from New Orleans, also commented about kids listening to rappers “rapping about killing people”, then “start trying to live that foolishness”. Perry noted that it is difficult working with students when “one parent, or both parents are in jail”. The teachers’ comments mirror the findings from Beabout’s (2010) study in which principals of

charter schools in the Recovery School District noted “violence...was an unfortunate part of our existence (p.412).”

Buras, Saltman, and others oppose privatization and instead advocate for the strengthening of public schools by addressing issues of economic inequalities and racial injustices. They see the use of property taxes to fund public schools along with increasing tax breaks for corporations as the main causes of school inequalities and school failures in the United States. This system gives more funding to majority-white, suburban schools while majority-Black, urban schools receive less and adds to “white competitive and comparative advantage” (Lipsitz, 2006, p.455).

Along with “inequitably resourced schools,” Ravitch (2014) argues, “our urban schools are in trouble because of concentrated poverty and racial segregation (p.4).” Similarly, Johnson (2008) and Michna (2009) also view poverty and segregation as “inter-locking factors” of school inequality. Education reform policies will not and cannot be truly effective unless it addresses these long-standing and deeply-rooted issues which continue to deny most poor and students of color equal educational opportunities.

### **Teachers' Experiences, Workload, and Pressures**

My second research question asked, "What are the experiences of teachers at this "failing" charter school?"

The participants in this study shared their experiences working at the New Orleans East Charter School (NOECS). Having such a diverse group of participants resulted in the documentation of unique experiences. There were many areas of overlap, where teachers had similar experiences, but also many areas of difference. While most teachers, including myself, viewed our time at the school as a "learning experience," they were also critical about school's leadership, which included the administration, Board, and EdisonLearning.

Sara, a veteran African-American teacher, noted

The lack of effective, consistent leadership [was a major issue]...The turnover rate for administrators was very high [and] I don't think that you can be very successful when there's that much instability.

Victoria, described the impact of the school's poor leadership

The faculty worked hard, and many were so disheartened by what they experienced at NOECS, that they left the field of teaching and education all together.

Victoria's comments align with Orange's (2014) study, which found that additional pressure from leadership resulted in increased stress for teachers and led to some teachers changing grades or resigning.

Some of the teachers with negative experiences at NOECS made comments

such as, “I’m very happy to no longer be there,” “The charter schools aren’t working at all,” and “I know I would not want to work at [another] charter school,” and, “NOECS was a terrible place to work.”

Alternatively, some teachers, including myself, described their experiences working at NOECS very positively. Perry commented, “I had really good experiences [there],” and that his interactions with the faculty, students, and Principal Patricia, “were always very positive.” Eric also noted his positive experiences, “I walked into a really good situation...I had a classroom full of readers, discipline wasn’t bad because I had the ability to discipline... I think working at NOECS was a really good year.”

Initially, behavior issues were a problem for me, but as I grew as a teacher and developed my classroom management skills, the behavior issues lessened. As I developed as a teacher under the guidance of the veteran teachers at NOECS along with my enrollment in graduate school, I was able to more successfully teach my students and so they showed significant growth as the years went on.

Here we see the similarities and differences between the teachers’ experiences at NOECS. Some described their experiences very negatively, while for others it was positive. An area where all the teachers were in agreement was the bond they developed with each other. The faculty was described as “a close-knit team,” “a family,” and “an awesome staff.” Eileen stated, “I have nothing but love for the amazing teachers,” while Eric commented, “I think we had a really good staff at NOECS, they really liked me and I liked them.”

My third research question asked, “How do teachers at this “failing” charter school describe their workload and pressures?”

All the participants noted large workloads along with lots of pressure while working at NOECS. The difference was that some teachers were able to manage the workload and pressures, while others could not. On this topic, Veronica commented

The workload and pressure at ICS were incredibly stressful. Many students were performing well under grade level, and we had to work incredibly hard to help them make academic gains without much assistance. The schools grade was low, so there was constant pressure for students to perform well on the end of year state tests. I would often stay late, work weekends, and apply for online grants to get much needed resources for my students...I think that I was able to handle them well.

Sara also mentioned the stress of not having many resources at NOECS, “the resources were few and the expectations were high...so every night I was searching the internet in search resources that I could use in the class.”

Eileen noted, “I was stressed all the time,” while Anita described the pressures working at a brand new school as “intense.”

Similarly Lisa commented,

The workload was too much like since it was a brand new school and many people were trying to turn around a failing school system in a place known for having a horrible education system, a lot of unrealistic expectations were placed on teachers and staff to perform.

Both Derrick and Jessica felt that they were “overworked” and received little to no assistance from administration. Ross noted that the pressures and stress caused one teacher “just shut down,” and also

I could see one of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers falling apart at the seams,  
and I felt sorry for her because there was nobody there to catch her  
and you know to support her.

While these teachers felt that the workloads and pressures were overwhelming, others did not. Yvonne described the workload and pressures at NOECS as “very manageable.” Similarly, Perry noted, “[Working at NOECS] wasn’t too bad stress-wise...it wasn’t too difficult or stressful for me.” Although Lucy, a white veteran teacher, noted a heavy workload at NOECS, “I handled everything I had to do.”

I, too, felt that the workload at NOECS was substantial. As part of the charter, NOECS had longer school days and also more school days than most public and charter schools at the time. We were assigned morning and afternoon duties, which made it difficult for faculty members with families and/or lived far from the school. Some teachers lived in Baton Rouge, which was about 65 miles away, and drove to NOECS every day for work. We also had professional developments during and after school, and were required to serve on at least two school committees. Overall, there was massive pressure to show student growth and achievement in order to stay open. If you were seen as a successful teacher, then you were given more freedom by administrators. Teachers that struggled received even more pressure instead of

support. This was one factor in the high turnover rate. I didn't really mind these pressures and challenges. I enjoyed working at NOECS and as I was viewed as a successful teacher, I was given more freedom and leeway than other teachers. Also, I lived in the same neighborhood as the school so it was easy to come in early and stay late.

### **Adding to the Critique of Privatization and For-Profit Charters**

My fourth research question asked, "How can lessons from these teachers' experiences be used to impact education reform?" Neoliberal reformers are using New Orleans as a "model" to increase the corporate takeover of public schools in other large urban areas. This study adds to the critique of privatization of public schools as well as the reliance on for-profit charters as a means of education reform. By sharing their experiences, teacher narratives can serve as powerful counter-narratives to the dominant narrative which portrays privatization of public education via charter schools as the solution to issues within education.

Opponents of privatization argue that because businesses are profit-driven, it is in their nature to find ways to cut costs, which in turn reduces the quality and effectiveness of the services they provide. For-profit schools have been found to 1) hire less experienced teachers, 2) standardize curriculum and operating procedures, and/or 3) recruit and keep students who are less demanding of resources (Saltman, 2005, p. 168). Charter schools' preference for hiring less experienced, non-unionized teachers is clearly a "cost-saving" measure as they work for a much lower



salary than their more experienced counterparts. Lucy noted that this was common at NOECS, which was “helpful from a budget perspective” as new teachers were “cheaper to hire.” The problem, she noted was that

there was no plan or investment in training/supporting/retaining new teachers and many left to find opportunities that provided such. This created several years with high teacher turnover and our school culture was watered down and lost.

Lucy’s comments mirror findings by Ravitch (2013)

Approximately 90 percent of charters are non-union...Their teachers serve at will and may be dismissed easily. This lets charters save money, but also tends to result in high teacher turnover. (p.20-21)

High staff turnover was an issue at NOECS. At the end of the first year in 2008-2009, 25 percent of the staff either chose not to return or did not have their contracts renewed. NOECS had a 33 percent staff turnover rate in its second (2009-2010) and fourth (2011-2012) years. At the end of the third year in 2010-2011, 55 percent of the staff either chose not to return or did not have their contracts renewed.

Similar to Lucy’s comments, Ross described the Teach for American (TFA) teachers at NOCES, “There was a lack of wisdom or knowhow and generally not knowing what to do...they were flying by the seat of their pants, learning on the go.” Relying on less-experienced TFA teachers coupled with not providing them with

adequate support created a very difficult situation for the TFA teachers and their students as well at NOECS.

Teach for America has a contract with the Louisiana Board of Education to provide the state with teachers. Eric was critical of other charter schools' reliance on Teach for America. As a veteran teacher, he recalled "[TFA] teachers walk out in a month...[because] they didn't know anything about teaching inside a large urban district." Eric's comments align with studies that found "50% of TFA teachers leave after 2 years, more than 80% leave after 3 years (Ravitch, 2014, p.138)." The high turnover rate of TFA teachers, or churn, causes tremendous problems for schools and districts. It is a financial burden to continuously recruit and train replacements for teachers who leave. These teachers' comments imply that veteran teachers can provide more stability for schools than TFA teachers. Similarly, Ravitch (2014) also claims that experienced teachers are more likely than TFA teachers to provide "higher achievement gains...and lower turnover (p.138)."

Eileen mentioned being passed over for a position post-NOECS despite having more experience, to a TFA teacher with no experience. These statements from the teachers fall in line with Ravitch's (2013) critique that TFA supplies "cheap labor" for charter schools throughout the nation (p.20). TFA students sign two-year contracts and begin teaching after five-weeks of training. They make significantly less than more-experienced teachers and are often placed in more challenging urban schools.

The more-experienced teachers were also critical that NOECS did not participate in the Louisiana State Teacher Retirement System. Ross recalled that prior to accepting his position at NOECS, Principal Darlene “promised the veteran teachers that they would be enrolled...back into the teacher retirement system” only to be informed afterwards that, “The Board voted against enrolling in state retirement because it was too expensive.” Sara noted that she “lost 2 years of retirement working with NOECS because they didn’t pay into the retirement system.” Eric was also critical that NOECS did not participate in the state retirement fund, noting that “charters should be required...to put your employees back in Louisiana Teacher Retirement.” This is another example of for-charters focus on increasing the “bottom line” and finding ways to cut costs, at the expense of their teachers.

Privatization also makes records/accounting/finances private, thus taking away public oversight and scrutiny, which makes it difficult to hold for-profit schools accountable for their improprieties. The teacher narratives revealed illegalities that occurred at NOECS. Eileen mentioned that Edison did not provide proper training, thus, “We were very far out of compliance in terms of our LEP students...we were not adhering to the law.”

On this topic, Victoria commented

There was a very large SPED population with a very small SPED staff that did not have the time or resources to service all students, which

meant many IEP's were not able to be truly fulfilled like they should have been.

Similarly, Lisa remarked

[There was] not a lot of special education support...We did not have all the resources necessary to help students, especially those students who had special education diagnoses, or those who needed to be tested for issues.

Perry also acknowledged that special needs students were not receiving all the services they were entitled to. He mentioned the SPED teachers "butting heads" with Principal Patricia because "[They] didn't get the support that they needed to do their jobs."

The teachers' comments align with the findings from the court case of *P.B. v. Pastorek*, which revealed 1) the struggles these students with disabilities encountered while attending RSD charter schools and 2) instances of RSD charter schools not being in compliance with or outright violating state and/or federal laws. Under Louisiana state law, RSD schools cannot have admissions requirements and must accept all students who apply for enrollment (Garda, 2012). Nevertheless, some RSD schools have been found to use "counseling out" tactics to pressure parents to either not apply to the school or to withdraw their student(s) from the school. Some charter schools fail to provide students with the services and accommodations stated in their IEPs. Other charter schools fail to modify and update IEPs as their students' needs change.

Some critics of the expansion believe charter schools purposely under-identify students with disabilities. Official numbers showed that NOECS had a SPED population of 8%, which is below the 10% special needs student population that is “mandated” by the state board (Garda, 2011, p.26). An ESS (Educational Support Systems) survey found New Orleans schools had an unusually high number of students with 504 plans and estimated that at least 30% of these students would qualify for special education services (P.B. v. Pastorek, 2010).

After the 10<sup>th</sup> day of suspension, schools are required under IDEA to complete a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and to implement or modify a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) for students with disabilities (Assistance to states, 2014, § 300.530(d); P.B. v. Pastorek, 2010). Many charter schools in New Orleans have been found in violation of this requirement. In 2010, a state review of records found that a large percentage of students in New Orleans with more than 10 days of OSS (out-of-school suspensions) did not have an appropriate BIP and the state also found that only 10 out of the 51 LEAs in New Orleans were compliant with IDEA (P.B. v. Pastorek, 2010).

In order to increase profits and cut costs, many charter schools look to private subcontractors to provide school-related services at the lowest cost (i.e. transportation services, food services, security, education/curriculum specialists), which may result in lower quality of services rendered. As discussed earlier, the teacher narratives revealed the problems with contracting transportation and food services at NOECS. The school’s hiring of “budget-friendly” bus companies led to

unusually long rides to and from school for the students (sometimes more than 2 hours). Parent complaints about the food quality led to changing of food service providers.

Many teachers I interviewed brought up issues with the profit-driven nature of charter schools in New Orleans. Lisa commented “Some of them seem to be fly by night companies, here to get your money but not give you what you need in return.” This is similar to Ravitch’s (2014) critique of for-profit charters

The for-profit chains are doing what businesses do in a competitive environment: they are practicing risk management, keeping winners and discarding the losers. That may work in business, where the goal is profitability. But it is wrong in education where public schools are expected to educate all children, not just the easiest to teach. (p.248)

Derrick was also extremely critical of for-profit charters

It’s a bunch of bullshit you know, because it’s all about money man.

These charter schools are making a shit load of money. It’s a business, they run these charter schools like it’s a business. They advertise on TV like they advertise a product, it’s a business.

The notion of “choice” is another selling point for charter schools, in which parents and students are no longer restricted to their neighborhood schools. New Orleans has an “open enrollment” policy, which means that parents are free to apply for admissions for their children to any charter school in the city. The problem is that “open enrollment” does not guarantee acceptance as many charter schools have

specific requirements, such as testing, for admission. These schools tend to be higher performing and often end up accepting only the best and brightest students in the city, thus relegating “lesser” students (students of color, students with disabilities and/or behavioral/emotional needs) to poorer performing schools. The charter school movement in New Orleans promised parents that they would have the ability to choose what schools their children attend, but in reality, the power of choice falls into the hands of the charter schools as they have the ability to pick and choose which students can/cannot attend their schools.

Research such as a 2010 study from the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty (IRP), concluded that the charter school movement in post-Katrina New Orleans has created a five “tiered” system of public schools in which not every student in the city receives the same quality education...[the system] sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools in the OPSB and BESE sectors, while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty schools in the RSD sector (p.3).” The higher-performing charter schools compete with one another for the best and brightest students across the city while relegating the lower-performing students to the “lower-tiered” schools. According to Akers (2012), this ensures that the higher-tiered schools continue to “achieve the standardized test scores needed to remain open and continue receiving state funds (p.40)” as the lower-tiered schools are punished, taken over, or closed for their “low performance.”

Like others, Brian Beabout (2010) also sees greater stratification among the “tiers” of charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans caused by the “creaming process whereby talented students are consolidated” at the higher performing schools (p.415).” In Beabout’s study of 10 New Orleans principals, the participants described the Recovery School District (RSD) as “the district of last resort...the lowest layer of schools in the city...the dumping ground (p.415).” Principals in the study also confirmed that they implemented disciplinary policies “to improve the quality of their schools...[by] selecting stronger students for their schools (p.415),” which meant the exclusion of weaker and/or more challenging students. By excluding “higher-cost” students, i.e. those with disabilities, special needs, and/or behavior issues, charter schools are able to protect their profits (Akers, 2012).

Many veteran teachers who taught in New Orleans prior to Katrina criticized open-enrollment and the busing of students all over the city instead of having them attend a public school in their neighborhood. Derrick commented

It’s [open enrollment] absolutely absurd to me. Before Katrina, majority of the kids walked home, there weren’t any buses, they didn’t bus the kids everywhere. I think it should go back to that - the kids go to the school in their neighborhood.

Eric noted that he “wasn’t the biggest fan [of] shipping kids back and forth”.

The post-Katrina charter school movement in New Orleans has turned parents into “consumers” who, instead of sending their children to neighborhood



schools, must now “shop” for educational services for their children (Akers, 2012, p. 40).

Saltman (2000) and Ravitch (2013) both add to the critique of privatizing education and forced competition, arguing that it is both inherently undemocratic. Public education is a common good that benefits everyone and schools are a “public forum (Saltman, 2000, p. 53)” where differing ideas intersect and compromises are made in a democratic fashion. Saltman (2000) believes that when schools are privatized, local communities lose control of their schools and dissenting voices are “locked out” from debates (p.53). Similarly, Ravitch (2013) argues that charter schools undermine public education, which is part of American democracy by creating

Legitimacy for the idea that schooling should be free market choice, rather than public responsibility...[as] public schools have the responsibility to admit all students and to adhere to the principle of equality of educational opportunity. (p. 21)

Privatizing education means that it is no longer a common good- it becomes a scarce commodity that is no longer easily accessible by everyone. The charter school movement has created a “new” segregation for the marginalized populations in New Orleans, i.e. the poor and people of color, as they are no longer guaranteed access to public education (Michna, 2009, p.451).

The teachers critiqued charter schools’ impact on communities in post-Katrina New Orleans. Ross believes that for-profit charter schools are “destroying

the community” because of a lack of a “web of interconnectivity” which exists between a community, its traditional public school, and local stakeholders. Similarly, Jessica discussed open-enrollment and the breakdown of community involvement

That’s another unfortunate piece because if you don’t have ties to the community then your parents are not vested in the community- they could care less about what’s going on, they could care less about coming to help.

Eileen noted that traditional public schools “serve as the bedrock of communities where all community needs could be met”, a role that for-profit charter schools do not provide the communities in which they operate. Eileen’s view of traditional public schools and their role in the community aligns with Michna (2009)

From Plessy’s era to ours, schools in New Orleans have “anchored” New Orleans’s oppressed communities—not only because their doors were open to all the children in a particular neighborhood, but because neighborhood schools serve as rallying points around which communities can organize broader struggles for equity in the city and the nation’s public sphere. (p.547)

Victoria remarked “The constant changing of schools from charter to charter takes away from community pride in their schools, and parent confidence in schools.”

These teachers’ comments are similar to the description of education in post-Katrina New Orleans given by Andre Perry, an associate director at the Institute for

Quality and Equity in Education at Loyola University, “Kids are smarter, but communities are weaker” (Carr, 2013).

### **Advocate for “Bottom-Up” Reform**

My fourth research questions asked, “How can lessons from these teachers’ experiences be used to impact education reform?” Current education reforms are passed from a “top-down approach,” where policy makers implement reform with little or no input from teachers/parents/administrators and force compliance through funding and/or disciplinary measures (Carr, 2013). As an alternative, Carr (2013) advocates for a “bottom-up approach” to education reform where teachers/parents/administrators have a greater role in the decision-making process. Rasheed (2006) also advocates for teachers having a more “substantial role in driving school reform (p.7).” Like Carr and Rasheed, the teachers were also critical of “top-down” reform.

According to Sara

So many lawmakers make laws and develop these “wonderful” ideas that affect teachers and no one has asked or consulted with the teachers. My ex-husband use to work at the department of education and we were amazed by the people that were sitting on boards developing things for teachers to do, that had never taught. This practice is absurd. Many of the practices that they mandate are not practical...I guess everyone knows what’s best for teachers but teachers.

The teachers overwhelmingly support a “bottom-up” approach to education reform. Lisa believes that teachers should be involved in the decision-making process while Sara feels that this approach “would be ideal” because “we are the experts in the field.” This mirrors Ravitch’s (2014) view that “classroom teachers are experts in education...their collective voices should be part of any public decision about school [reform] (p.23).”

Similarly, Yvonne commented about teachers having a greater role in education reform

Agreed! Teachers are the ones dealing with the day-to-day challenges in education; they know what’s working and what’s not. Of course they should be determining education reform over lawmakers who have probably not spent a day doing the actual work of educating.

Victoria also felt that it is important for teachers to be included in the decision-making process

This is so very much needed. People who have not been in a classroom as an educator ever or in many years, are not properly able to make informed decisions that will improve education...They need to talk to current teachers about the issues they face every day.

As education reform becomes more and more synonymous with standardization and privatization, teachers and those in education are seemingly being attacked from all sides- lack of respect from parents and students, lack of job security and support from administration, lack of funding and increasing

standardization from lawmakers. I believe that in order to have effective education reform, policymakers should listen to teachers because they are the ones in classrooms with students and would know what changes are needed.

The new presidential administration's support for increased privatization of public education through charter schools puts the traditional public schools and the communities they serve across the nation at risk. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is calling for the "transformation" of the nation's education system through "the most ambitious expansion of education choice in our nation's history (Richardson, 2017)." As we have seen in New Orleans and other urban cities, "school choice" can have devastating effects on primarily poor and colored students and communities. Under the traditional public school system, all students are guaranteed admission to their neighborhood school. When public schools are privatized and converted into charter schools, there may be admissions requirements and testing which allow the schools to select the best and brightest, thus "locking out" students who are viewed as "too costly" to educate, i.e. students with disabilities, behavior challenges, etc. Public education has been a cornerstone of our democracy for over 150 years and is intended to be a social good that benefits everyone and is accessible to all. Public education is not a commodity that can be bought and sold by the select few. The President's budget calls for a \$10.6 billion cut to public education, while "seeks to spend \$400 million to expand charter schools... and another \$1 billion to push public schools to adopt choice-friendly policies (Brown, Strauss, & Douglas-Gabriel, 2017)." Some view this as a mass transfer of

public tax-payer money to private corporate entities, thus enabling them to profit from the dismantling of public education. I believe that narrative research can be used as a tool to give “voice” to those who are impacted by the charter school movement- the communities, schools, teachers, parents, and students. Their voices and stories can serve as a powerful tool to combat the dominant narratives and false promises of those who seek to destroy public education. We must fight to not only save public education from the neoliberal ideologies of privatization and profiteering, but to also truly reform public education by addressing the deeply-rooted issues of poverty and segregation. Only then can the goal of equal educational opportunities for all students be achieved.

“The democratic faith in human equality is belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has.” - John Dewey, 1922

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

Questions for part one focus on their individual experiences inside their classrooms:

- 1) Tell me some memorable experiences with your students during your time at the school.
- 2) Were experiences like the one you just described a common occurrence in your classroom? Why/why not?
- 3) Tell me about the student population you worked with. What were the challenges of working with this population?
- 4) Describe your teaching philosophy, teaching style, and classroom environment.
- 5) Do you think these had any impact on your teaching experiences? Explain.
- 6) Can you talk about the workload and pressures you faced working at this school?
- 7) How well were you able to handle them? Would you have done anything differently?

Questions for part two focus on the school- their experiences with administrators, parents, etc.:

- 1) Tell me about your previous teaching experiences and how you came to this school.
- 2) Tell me about your overall experiences at this school.
- 3) Tell me about your experiences with the school board, Edison Learning representatives, administration, parents, students, and other teachers.
- 4) What challenges/successes did the school have during your time there?
- 5) In your opinion, why did the school fail? How did it impact the faculty/parents/students?
- 6) What changes should have/not been made?
- 7) How was the school perceived by insiders/outsideers? Look at documents and comment.

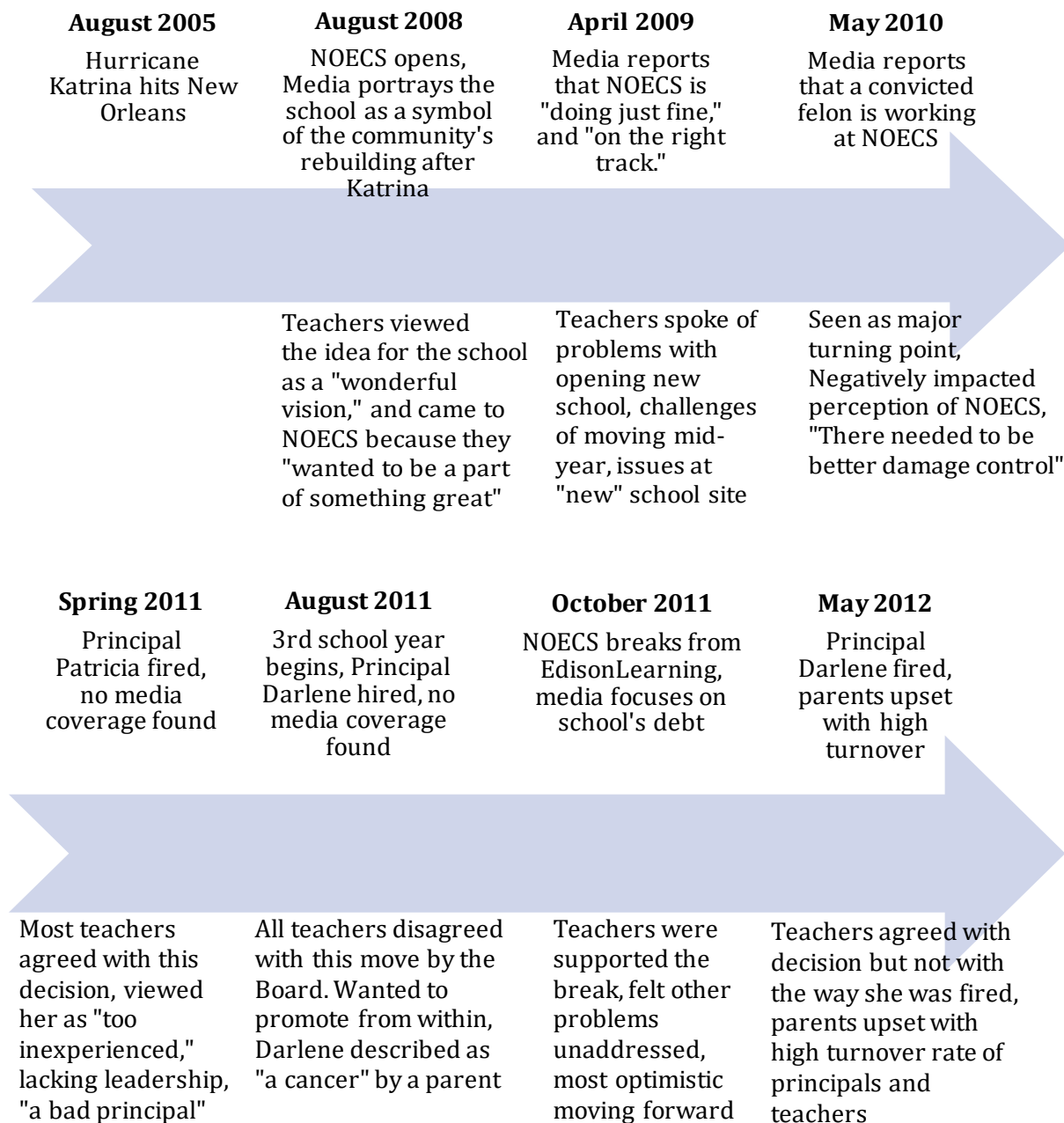
Questions for part three focus on their views on the broader school accountability movement and charter school movement, along with their views on how education reform can better help teachers/schools/students/communities in urban areas like New Orleans:

- 1) Tell me about your thoughts on the school accountability movement. How has it impacted teachers and students?

- 2) Under this system, how are success and failure defined? How should it be defined?
  - 3) What changes could be made to improve the state of education and educational equality for all students?
  - 4) Tell me about your thoughts on the charter school movement in New Orleans. If you taught here before Katrina, compare/contrast teaching before and after the storm, public/private/charter school differences. How has it impacted teachers and students?
  - 5) What are some issues/problems with charter schools in New Orleans? Solutions?
  - 6) What are some issues/problems facing poorer communities/communities of color in New Orleans? How can education reform help address these issues?
- I modified these questions to fit the participant's position and time working at the school.

## Appendix B

### Timeline of Events





## **VITA**

**Trung Luu Nguyen**

### **Educational History**

2017	Ph.D.	Curriculum & Instruction, Pennsylvania State University
2011	MAT	Elementary Education, Reading Specialist add-on, Xavier University
2005	B.A.	History, Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi

### **Professional Experience**

2012-2017	Graduate Instructor, College of Education, Pennsylvania State University
2008-2012	Teacher- 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade, Intercultural Charter School of New Orleans East
2006-2008	Substitute Teacher- Grades 1st-12th, Katy ISD

### **University Courses Taught at Pennsylvania State University:**

LLED 400, Teaching Reading in Elementary School  
LLED 401, Teaching Language Arts in Elementary School

### **Presentations**

2015	"Flooding of the Promised Land: Ten Years After Katrina", Department of African-American Studies, Penn State University
2012	Study Island program and website, Intercultural Charter School of New Orleans East
2011	JPAMS online grade book, Intercultural Charter School of New Orleans East
2010	Edison Benchmark Testing, Intercultural Charter School of New Orleans East

### **Membership in Professional Organizations**

2013-present American Education Research Association (AERA)  
2013-present Literacy Research Association (LRA)  
2011-present Louisiana Middle School Association (LMSA)  
2011-present Louisiana Association of Computer Using Educators (LACUE)