Can a 'Moneyball' Approach Turn Around New Orleans Schools?

Scores are rising as teachers track data and look for patterns to improve classroom learning.

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NEW ORLEANS—As her class winds down on a recent Thursday morning at Sci Academy, a charter high school in New Orleans East, Katie Bubalo hands out a short survey, called an "exit ticket," to her sophomore English students. She does this every period to see how much of the lesson students absorbed.

The second of three questions reads:

What is the main idea of this passage?

1. Oedipus does not believe the seer because he is blind and untrustworthy.
2. Oedipus is in disbelief about his fate and mocks the seer.
3. The seer attempts to deliver bad news but realizes he cannot because Oedipus is the king.
4. Oedipus listens intently to the seer, all the while realizing his disastrous fate.

Papers shuffle forward and kids walk out the door. Then Bubalo shakes hands with every student who files in for the next period, after which she distributes another survey—an "entry ticket"—administered at the beginning of a class to see whether students retained the previous day’s material. Later, she’ll feed the entry and exit data, along with attendance information and other performance measures, into Sci’s software system.

The theory is that, over time, patterns emerge to tell teachers who is succeeding, where students fall short, how to remediate them, and what correlations might exist between performance and, say, poverty or the length of a commute. Administrators even track their former students through the first year of college to see how they can better prepare their 9th- and 10th-graders for the challenges to come. Sabermetrics suffuse Sci Academy, and every teacher is Billy Beane.
It’s working. Sci, whose student body is representative of most pre-Katrina public schools (92 percent are on free or reduced lunch and 95 percent are black), is a star performer in a reinvented school system obsessed with analytics. After Hurricane Katrina, the city of New Orleans laid off every public-school teacher and started from scratch. It turned over most of the system to the state-run Recovery School District, which began issuing charter licenses that allow schools to operate in whatever way they see fit, as long as they meet certain standards. The RSD is strict about credentialing only ambitious, college-prep schools—and even stricter about closing them after three years if they fall below expectations. Eight years after Katrina, more than 80 percent of the city’s students now attend a charter school. And the early results are amazing.

Before Katrina, the passing rate on state tests was 35 percent; now it’s 60 percent. The graduation rate has climbed from 55 percent to over 75 percent, surpassing the national average. Before the storm, three-fifths of the city’s students attended a failing school; now fewer than one-fifth do, even as standards got tougher. And parents are 40 percent more likely to send their kids to a school other than the one closest to their home, according to a forthcoming study by Douglas N. Harris, an education economist at Tulane, and several of his colleagues. (Most charter schools, like Sci, are open-enrollment; there are no more district schools.) At this rate, within five years New Orleans will become the first major city in the country to exceed its state’s average scores.

At a time when sexy reinventions are unfolding across town—in the tech sector, the nonprofit world, and even the film industry—the school system represents the most meaningful and most insufficiently heralded change. It has risen from a state of crisis to a state of mediocrity, which counts for a miracle here. “New Orleans has undergone the largest and quickest improvement in the history of public education in America,” says Michael Stone, chief external relations officer at New Schools for New Orleans, a school-innovation nonprofit.

At the same time, a revolution done on the fly is unlikely to achieve perfect results. While the school system has finally begun to address the most crucial social pathology here—the educational barriers to income mobility—the overhaul created a raft of new, lesser problems that local reformers have not entirely figured out how to solve.

For starters, hard-luck cases pose an open-enrollment dilemma. Federal law requires publicly funded schools to educate kids with special needs, but in 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center found systematic mistreatment in RSD schools. Students with disabilities were enrolling at about two-thirds the rate of those statewide and graduating at only one-third the rate. Like students with criminal records or those emerging from incarceration, disabled kids were sometimes admitted and then (nearly 30 percent of the time) suspended for the year, since schools didn’t have the resources to cope with them.
“When you have a high-stakes accountability system like this one, there’s an incentive to keep low-performing students out,” says Tulane’s Harris. The pre-Katrina Orleans Parish School Board might have been a flawed and even corrupt organization, but it was also a single coordinating authority that offered a kind of safety net so students didn’t slip out of the system. Southern Poverty Law launched a discrimination suit in 2010 that is still pending as schools have begun to improve. Teachers offer another paradox. Their quality has improved in the aggregate. But they’re not an experienced group, and they’re often not part of the community they teach. In the early years after Katrina, says John Ayers, director of Tulane’s Cowan Institute for Public Education Initiatives, between one-third and one-half of teachers were from Teach for America, an excellent program of mostly wealthy, white, elite-college graduates in their 20s. But 88 percent of New Orleans public-school students are black, and 85 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Kids did not have a surfeit of role models from their own community. Teach for America instructors are now only about one-fifth of the city’s teacher corps, but they still outnumber veteran local educators of the kind laid off after the storm. (A corollary problem is that white middle- and upper-class students almost uniformly stick to the private- or magnet-school system.)

Meanwhile, the highest-performing teachers are, predictably, the ones working 60-to-90-hour weeks. “People burn out and leave to start a family or a real career,” says Sarah Carr, the author of Hope Against Hope, an outstanding book about the post-K school system. It makes teacher-development very difficult. An early-morning faculty meeting at Sci was peopled almost entirely by twentysomething faces; 30 percent of the staff are people of color. “We are always trying to recruit veteran educators,” says Morgan Ripski Carter, president of the charter organization that owns Sci. “If they’re here [in New Orleans], they’re not available” because they’re already in such high demand.

Charter-reform advocates also question a model that favors prep schools. The RSD grants charter licenses only to administrators who promise to ready high schoolers for college; there is not a single vocational or technical high school in a city of 370,000. This swamp town has a dire shortage of air-conditioning repairmen, a job that pays well, but no pipeline to create more. It will need future stevedores, lab techs, and film crew. But what parent (or city) wants to decide that their own kids aren’t fit for college? “You’ve got kids who everyone said couldn’t learn before,” says Mayor Mitch Landrieu, who has no role overseeing the city’s schools but is rightly proud of their progress. “Well, they’re leaning now. And each of them knows they’re going to graduate from college.” About half actually do matriculate.

Perhaps the biggest hitch in the new system is school closures. On one hand, the RSD’s “no excuses” philosophy shuts downs schools that constantly underperform on state tests, rather than allowing students to continue being undereducated in perpetuity, as under the old system. But even zealous charter advocates point out that testing is not the only way to demonstrate quality. A
superior high school might turn semiliterate ninth-graders into graduates who read at a 10th-grade level. Unfortunately, that is still considered failure, because tests value absolute performance over rates of improvement.

“We think good schools—which brought students far along but not up to requisite test level—have been closed,” says Ayers, who cautions that Tulane researchers like Harris are still crunching the data. Studies in other cities, he says, have shown that “there are lots of schools that have high value-added scores but middling test scores.”

And when those schools do close, students and their families may drift through the system, often to other underperforming sites. “I’ve met families whose kids have hit six or seven schools since Katrina, [each closed,] and ended up at schools of about the same performance,” says Carr.

“Officials should see if there’s a significantly better school to send kids to [before they close a charter], or else it’s pointless to send them away.”

Ultimately, what’s happening here has never been done before, and the most steadfast defenders argue it’s so much better than the antediluvian system. “You hear reformers say, ‘You don’t want to go back,’ ” Ayers says. “But we’re starting to now say, ‘We need more sophisticated discussion about what is this thing going to look like.’ ” As Carr puts it, schools must be compared to what they should be, not to what they were before Katrina.

At the Sci faculty meeting, teachers are gleeful about the 35 college acceptances that had flowed in during the last few days; that morning, one student was admitted to Barnard. This, New Orleanians are beginning to hope, is a vision of the future. They’ll just need more than what the system provides today. Sabermetrics got Billy Beane’s Oakland A’s into the playoffs—but it still hasn’t won them a championship.