Can School Reform Hurt Communities?

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NEW ORLEANS — BEFORE Hurricane Katrina, about 74 percent of this city’s schools were considered “failing,” based mainly on their standardized test scores. By 2012, that figure had dropped to 42 percent, even as the bar for passing was raised. Average ACT scores for the city’s public school students have inched up. In 2011, black students in New Orleans outperformed their peers in the rest of Louisiana for the first time since the state test scores have been tracked.

There are multiple explanations for the improvements. The schools spend more per pupil on average than they did before Katrina, for example. But most explanations have focused on the radical overhaul of the city’s education system: the expansion of independent charter schools (which more than 80 percent of New Orleans public school children now attend); a greater reliance on alternative teacher training programs like Teach for America; and the increased use of test scores to determine whether educators should keep their jobs and schools should stay open.

New Orleans may be the extreme test case, but reforms like these are reshaping public education across the country. The movement is rooted in the notion that “fixing” schools is the strongest lever for lifting communities out of poverty. The criminal justice and health care systems may be broken, living-wage jobs in short supply, and families forced to live in unstable or unsafe conditions. But the buck supposedly stops in the classroom. Thus teachers can find themselves charged with remedying an impossibly broad set of challenges that go far beyond reading at grade level.

In New Orleans, this single-minded focus on school improvement has given new hope to many low-income families, but it has also destabilized the broader community in some unanticipated ways. Consider the cost to many veteran educators, who formed the core of the city’s black middle class. After the flood, officials fired 7,500 school employees. An unknown number were ultimately rehired by the reconstituted traditional and charter schools, but they often found themselves working in a very different environment.
The growth in charter schools has fostered an unrelenting focus on preparation for standardized tests and college. Some classes begin with students as young as 5 chanting: “This is the way — hey! — we start the day — hey! We get the knowledge — hey! — to go to college — hey!” At the end of the summer, this year’s incoming kindergartners will most likely be told that they are members of the class of 2030, for the year they will graduate from college.

The obstacles that stand in the way of this goal — poverty, trauma, parental ambivalence — are considered “excuses” that must not distract from the quest. Watching this mentality play out in the lives of families and educators can be both inspiring and frightening.

For teachers it has meant a bias toward a kind of youthful idealism that prevails in many New Orleans charter schools. The consummate teacher willingly works 70-hour weeks, consents to daily feedback on everything from lesson plan to tone of voice, and takes full responsibility for his students’ successes and failings. Young principals pump up their even younger teachers, telling them, “What you do is the most important work in the world.” Staff meetings can feel like a cross between summer camp and cult revival, as teachers gather in circles, praise one another for redirecting a wayward student or helping an overwhelmed colleague, and recite one another’s names in unison.

This mentality has attracted ambitious, talented young teachers from across the country. But it has also risked turning teaching into a missionary pursuit. At a few of the charter schools I have reported on over the last six years, less than 10 percent of the teachers came from New Orleans or were older than 35. “I think a lot of people who come to New Orleans want to change New Orleanians,” said Mary Laurie, a veteran school administrator and principal of O. Perry Walker High School.

Test scores might have risen, but fewer educators are considered part of the community fabric and understand the social and cultural context in which their students live. As Andre Perry, an associate director at the Institute for Quality and Equity in Education at Loyola University, put it, “Kids are smarter, but communities are weaker.”

This disconnect can manifest itself in ways both small (as when a teacher fails to recognize a popular New Orleans term, like “beaucoup” for “a lot”) and large (as when a teacher can’t grasp what students are going through at home).

Edward Wiltz, a truck repairman whom I met during the 2010-11 school year, sees both advantages and drawbacks to the new approach. He appreciates the energy and enthusiasm
of the teachers at the charter schools his teenage son has attended, and loves the many out-of-town college trips (“They have more drilling — five, six, seven, eight! — on college than I had all through high school”). But he says some young teachers expect students to behave like robots (“go home, pass my test”) even as the teenagers grapple with hunger, homelessness and gun violence.

The most challenging students — those with severe special needs, a history of school expulsions or a criminal record — can also suffer disproportionately from a narrow focus on school improvement and test score gains. These are the students the schools have the least incentive to enroll (during my years reporting on New Orleans charters, I witnessed some cases where school leaders forced these students into withdrawing). Yet they are also the ones who must be reached if the city hopes to reduce its unconscionably high rates of gun violence and incarceration.

In 2011, I immersed myself in Sci Academy, an ambitious young charter school. One of the students at the school was a 16-year-old freshman who read at a second-grade level and performed math at a third-grade level. By the time he transferred to Sci Academy in the summer of 2010, he had very nearly been killed in a drive-by shooting, spent more than three months out of school on suspension, and changed schools six times in two years. He was one of the plaintiffs in a federal discrimination suit alleging that many New Orleans schools deny admission to students with disabilities and fail to serve adequately those they do admit. Sci Academy would send nearly every member of its first graduating class off to college. But this student required more than the school could give him — even with a designated mentor on hand. “He needs and deserves a full-day therapy program that does not exist,” said Ben Marcovitz, the school’s founder.

He ended up being arrested on suspicion of armed robbery last year. His needs, like those of countless students, proved too complex for his teachers to address alone. It didn’t help that, in 2009, state officials closed the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital, significantly reducing the treatment options for teenagers with mental health crises.

The focus on school improvement in New Orleans has succeeded in lifting the average student from a state of academic crisis to one of academic mediocrity; that’s not an insignificant achievement for a city where 42 percent of children live in poverty, nearly double the national rate. Yet as another summer begins, we should also reflect on a different lesson this experience has taught us: we can ask more of our public schools without asking them to save our cities all on their own.