In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many saw a golden opportunity to reform New Orleans’ public schools. Two years after the storm, that vision of a high-quality and equitable education system has not materialized. This project aims to expose the underpinnings of the inequitable school system to call attention to the current crisis and urges for new and more just policies and actions in order to address the disparities of the current situation.

The public schools mirrored these structural stratifications, concentrating mostly poor black students in the schools that were systemic of failure. More than 90 percent of the public schools consisted of 95 percent or more black students. Over half of the schools were deemed “academically unacceptable.”

After the storm, the state took governance of all “academically unacceptable” schools and created a dual school system. The under-achieving schools were organized in the Recovery School District (RSD), while the high-achieving and often selective schools were left under the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB).

The reorganization of the schools into two separate but unequal districts has led to an even more formidable urban underclass—poor black students—in the Recovery School District. The Orleans Parish School Board schools, mostly selective admission charter schools, are performing significantly better than those of the Recovery School Districts and almost on par with the schools of St. Tammany.

The challenge for New Orleans now is to create an equitable educational system, which will grant access to high-quality education for all residents.

New Orleans’ schools as a whole are highly segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines compared to its surrounding areas.

Compared to the Orleans Parish School Board, the Recovery School District has extremely high concentrations of students who are poor and black.

Student proficiency in New Orleans’ schools, while below its neighbors before the storm, has improved.

The golden opportunity to reform the public school system in New Orleans, it seems, has not been grasped. Instead of ensuring equal educational opportunities, the recovery process has rebuilt the structures of inequities that existed prior to the storm.

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The challenge for New Orleans now is to create an equitable educational system, which will grant access to high-quality education for all residents.

New Orleans should seriously consider the notion of schools as neighborhood community centers such as those proposed in the Unified Orleans Plan—and not state-run entities—to facilitate the rebuilding of schools and communities.

The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy

References


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Data on school enrollment, student population characteristics, and testing results were collected from the Louisiana Department of Education in order to compare between the districts and among the parishes. The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and U.S. Census Bureau provided additional data for New Orleans and its neighbors.

Student proficiency in New Orleans' schools, while below its neighbors before the storm, has improved.

When the two districts are individually examined, less than one percent of the Recovery School District's students are proficient in English and in Math.

The urban underclass in the public schools of post-disaster New Orleans

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