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The New Orleans  
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With Dr. Raynard Sanders

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## Our Gated Public Schools

*New Orleans is the only city in the nation where neighborhood children do not have a right to attend any of their open-enrollment neighborhood schools.*

Raynard Sanders, Ed.D.

When one looks at the history of public education in New Orleans, which begins in 1841, as it relates to equity, it is clear that it operated like most southern school districts in typically segregated societies. For most of the history of public education in New Orleans, it was the norm for students of color to attend schools a distance from their homes in that they were not allowed to go to the school across the street or around the corner. Like other southern cities, it was years before New Orleans complied with the U.S. Supreme court order to integrate public schools. In that 1954 case, *Brown vs. Topeka*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional, thus allowing children to attend neighborhood schools. In New Orleans it was not until the mid-1960’s that African American students were actually allowed to attend schools in their neighborhoods. Given our societal acceptance of diversity in our country today, one would think that children in America would never be subjected to such discriminatory practices of denying children access as was done years ago. However earlier this month, the state board that oversee K-12 public education passed a resolution essentially denying children the right to attend public schools in their neighborhoods. Since “school choice” was hailed as a way to free students trapped in failing schools, what happened in New Orleans? How can an education reform movement touted by local, state and national leaders as the “model for urban public education” end up treating children as they were treated years ago: locked out of their own neighborhood schools? Naturally that would be anyone’s question reading this article or hearing about such a bizarre decision.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Education took control of 107 public schools in New Orleans. This action was the result of ACT 35, state legislation which declared that the public schools in New Orleans was a “district in academic crisis”. ACT 35, which was passed on November 29, 2005, was crafted to make one-time changes to the existing school takeover policy for only public schools in New Orleans. In lobbying for this legislation, state education officials decided—while most residents were evacuated from the hurricane—that

converting all the schools to charter schools would solve the long standing academic ills for thousands of children in failing schools. Just prior to the passing of ACT 35, then Governor Kathleen Blanco declared that a state takeover would create a “new birth of excellence and opportunity” for the city’s school children. With that, New Orleans now has the largest percentage of charter schools than any city in the country. It has been hailed by state, national leaders as the model for turning around urban school districts. Charter schools have quickly become the norm in New Orleans, popping up across the city with many of them sharing school buildings while district run schools are closed.

The charter school movement is mainly based on the idea of “school choice.” Proponents hold that charter schools are “schools of choice,” open to all, but selected by individual families. Superintendent Paul Vallas routinely states that the problem with public schools in New Orleans pre-Katrina was that students were trapped in failing neighborhood schools. According to national educational researcher Leigh Dingerson, who has written extensively on public schools New Orleans, “this kind of thinking resonates with some parents, in that chartering offers them the option to escape from an environment—traditional public schools—seen as chaotic, where students who aren’t interested in learning are disruptive and even violent. Because families choose the school, students will be more motivated; parents will be more involved; and instruction will not be interrupted by disruptive students.”

However this new education reform movement quickly drew its critics who charged that the charter schools were not offering real choice for many parents and, in fact, through admission requirements or conditions on admission, were in reality selective admission schools. The students that needed the most help were not being accepted by charter schools—which was the main purpose of reforming the failed public school district in New Orleans. The critics claimed that any charter school success was a result of schools cherry-picking the best students. Of course, state officials and charter proponents denied these accusations and continually stated that charter schools were open to all students.

Another criticism of the reform movement was that there were no more neighborhood schools and that too many students were being transported across town to school. Parents and community members complained that students assemble daily on the streets of New Orleans as early as 5:45 AM to catch school buses to school and return home after 5:00 PM. These students, ranging from kindergarten to twelfth-grade on the same bus, ride for up to an hour and half each day to and from school. If parents have no private transportation, they may find it impossible to reach the school if their child needs them since public transportation has never recovered since Katrina. In a town hall meeting last year, when a state education official asked Superintendent Vallas what percentage of students were being bused daily, Vallas stated that a staggering 92% of the students in the state direct-run schools were riding buses to school. Needless to say, this is unheard of in urban school districts. In addition to the strain being placed on the students and parents daily, the cost to the school district for the transportation is higher than the national average and these funds could, instead, be used in the classroom.

In response to these criticisms, state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek recently recommended to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), which oversees K-12 education in Louisiana, that charter schools be required to enroll 20% of their students from their surrounding neighborhood. On Friday April 8, 2011, Pastorek's recommendation came up on the BESE board agenda for approval. Several charter schools operators argued against the recommendation, stating that students attending neighborhood schools was not a good idea and that we should never return to a neighborhood-based enrollment system. Among the charter opponents were representatives of charter schools that had expelled more than 50% of their special needs students that had been forced to enroll, so it was clear that they had no intention allowing the BESE board to force them to enroll any child who might increase their costs and reduce their profits. Not surprisingly, the BESE board rejected the mandatory 20% neighborhood enrollment and made it voluntary. BESE knows from experience that charters want to cherry-pick the best students and that they have no intention of enrolling neighborhood students on a voluntary basis. In 2006, BESE had to force charter schools to enroll a minimum percentage of special needs after a similar "voluntary enrollment" policy failed.

This action by the BESE board thus allows charter schools to continue their individualized enrollment practices and keeps thousands of children riding school buses to and from school. Charter schools need "city wide enrollment," even if it comes at the disadvantage of neighborhood children, because it allows them to cherry-pick the best students from all 40,000 students in the city, rather than be limited to students in their surrounding neighborhood—as public schools are normally required to do. Parents don't have much "choice" when charter schools are selecting students based on academic ability or using exorbitant activity fees, screening parents in home interviews, or demanding that the parent be responsible for transporting their child to school on Saturdays. In reality, the schools are doing the choosing: not the parent.

### **Is the tail wagging the dog?**

What's missing in the discussion about charter schools in New Orleans is that *charter schools in reality are contractors hired to provide a public service*. This relationship is exactly like any other public service that is contracted out to a private vendor either for low cost or efficiency. However for some strange reason we treat charter school operators like they hold unique authoritative position in their role of providing a public service and allow them to dictate the scope and terms of the work. When the BESE board caved in to the charter schools' objection to neighborhood enrollment, we unfortunately witnessed *the vendor telling the BESE board how to make their work easier, despite the needs of the children* (keep it mind throughout all of this the charter schools are making money).

What is so unfortunate for the children and parents is that the charter school model was sold to them as an *inclusive* entity, when in reality it is an *exclusive* entity that selects students just like

magnet schools or any other private selective admission school. As a result of the BESE board decision, charter schools have become “Gated Public Schools” for thousands of children.

It is also unfortunate that individual donors, the philanthropic community, and foreign countries have given millions of dollars to improve the educational environment of the students with the greatest needs. Instead of following their wishes and living up to that noble commitment, our educational leaders have re-established a “Separate and Unequal” school district. But this time segregation is based on academic ability, not race: yet it is just as damaging to the students caught in “unequal” side of the equation.

The education reform movement in New Orleans began with the goal of designing schools to improve the educational environment of historically disadvantaged children; lamentably, the reformers have shifted to creating exclusive institutions that are based on race, class and the profit motive.

So much for school choice; so much for equity and the public good.