

New Orleans Charter School Problems Exposed At NAACP Hearing

[Bill Quigley](#)

New Orleans is the nation's largest and most complete experiment in charter schools. After [Hurricane Katrina, the State of Louisiana took control of public schools in New Orleans](#) and launched a [nearly complete](#) transformation of a public school system into a system of charter schools. Though there are [spots of improvement](#) in the New Orleans charter system, major problems remain.

Many of these problems were on display in New Orleans when the NAACP, which last year called for a [moratorium on charter schools](#) until issues of accountability and transparency were addressed, held a community forum in New Orleans on charters. The New Orleans hearing, which can be viewed [here](#), featured [outraged students, outraged parents, and dismayed community members](#) reciting a litany of the problems created by the massive change to a charter school system. The single most powerful moment came when a group of students from [Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools](#) took the podium and detailed the many ways the system has failed and excluded them from participating in its transformation.

“We really wanted to share what happens in our schools” writes 18 year old Big Sister Love Rush in an [article on the challenges the students face](#). “How the few permanent teachers we have work so hard for us, how so many classes are ran by short term substitutes, how food runs out at meal times, and how we worry if our school's reputation is good enough to support us in getting into the college or careers we want. We shared how we face two hour

commutes to and from school, are forced to experiment with digital learning with systems like Odyssey, are punished for having the wrong color sweater, or how we worry about being able to attend a school that will give us the education we need.”

In summary, the NAACP heard that the charter system remains highly segregated by race and economic status. Students have significantly longer commutes to and from school. The percentage of African American teachers has declined dramatically leaving less experienced teachers who are less likely to be accredited and less likely to remain in the system. The costs of administration have gone up while resources for teaching have declined. Several special select schools have their own admission process which results in racially and economically different student bodies. The top administrator of one K-12 system of three schools is paid over a quarter of a million dollars. Students with disabilities have been ill served. Fraud and mismanagement, which certainly predated the conversion to charter schools, continue to occur. Thousands of students are in below average schools. Students and parents feel disempowered and ignored by the system.

The birthing of the charter system occurred in 2005 when the community was displaced by Katrina. Control of the public school system was taken away from a board which had an elected majority of African American officials and was given to the white majority board of the state system.

The first casualty of the abrupt change was the termination of the South's largest local union and the firing of over 7000 most African American female teachers. Attorney Willie Zanders told the NAACP of the years of struggle for those teachers which, though initially successful, ended in bitter defeat years later. The city's veteran black educators were replaced by younger, less qualified white teachers from Teach for America and Teach NOLA.

The change to charters reduced the [percentage of black teachers from 74 percent to 51 percent](#). There are now [fewer experienced teachers](#), fewer accredited teachers, fewer local teachers, and more teachers who are likely to leave than before Katrina. [Five charter schools have tried to unionize](#) with United Teachers of New Orleans. Though two schools cooperated, two other charters have said they are exempt from NLRB – a position [rejected by the National Labor Relations Board](#). One of those charter schools shut out the public in 2016 by [meeting privately and online](#) over how to respond to unionization efforts.

New Orleans now [spends more on administration and less on teaching](#) than they did before Katrina. One charter school executive, who oversees one K-12 school on three campuses, [was paid \\$262,000 in 2014](#). At least 62 other charter execs made more than \$100,000. This compares with the salary of [\\$138,915 for the superintendent of all the public schools in Baton Rouge](#).

Admissions have been dramatically changed. In the new system, there is no longer any right to attend the neighborhood school. [86% no longer attend the school closest](#) to their homes. Siblings do not automatically go to the same school, and no one is guaranteed a spot at their local school. Many [families are frustrated](#) by the admission process.

[Seven select high performing schools](#) do not use the system wide application process, called ONE APP. The “lotteries” run by these super select schools are not transparent but [complex screening devices](#). The most selective, highest performing, and well-funded charter schools have [many more white children attending them than the system as a whole as a result of special non-transparent admission processes](#). This is so well known that a local newspaper article headlined its article about some of the schools as [“How 3 top New Orleans public schools keep students out.”](#)

This special admission process has significant racial impact. [Most white students in public schools attend selective public schools](#) that administer special tests that students must pass to be enrolled. [Tulane University](#) reported the charter system in New Orleans remains highly segregated in much the same way as before Katrina. This seems to be reflective in schools across the country where the [charter school movement has been charged with re-segregating public schools](#). One select New Orleans charter school, Lusher, [reported its student body](#) was 53% white, 21% economically disadvantaged and 4% special education in comparison to the overall system which is 7% white, 85% economically disadvantaged and 11% special education.

Another result of eliminating neighborhood schools is New Orleans students now have nearly [double the commute and the system is paying \\$30 million to bus students compared to \\$18 million before](#) Katrina. [Dr. Raynard Sanders](#) notes the elimination of neighborhood schools can be observed in the early morning hours. “We now have thousands of children beginning their school day travel at 6:15 and ending at 5:15 PM, with many students spending hours or more traveling to and from school. This insane strategy puts kids in harms way daily as students cross major thoroughfares in the early morning hours, which resulted in one five year old’s death to date. Despite numerous complaints from parents stating they want neighborhood schools state education officials have ignored their cries and continue this dangerous daily student migration.”

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One of the more dramatic and well-documented problems in the changeover to charters is the absence of services for students with disabilities.

The [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) sued over disability violations in 2010...

The [original complaint](#) is here. Children with disabilities had been denied enrollment altogether, forced to attend schools ill-equipped or lacking resources to serve them, and suspended without procedural protections. A third grader with emotional problems was locked in the school closet and similarly a seventh grader expelled for emotional disabilities. After suit was filed it took an additional [four years](#) to [set up a system to uphold the educational rights](#) of students with disabilities. Now, there is a district-wide consent decree in place overseen by an Independent Monitor who reports to the Court.

Yet, the disability problems remain. In 2017 a charter was rebuked for [suspending a student who the school thought was depressed](#). In 2016 [the State found that the school was engaging in special education fraud](#) by illegally taking public money by artificially inflating special education services, while at the same time ignoring special education students, telling staff they were “to be a secondary priority to students who were more likely to pass the state assessments” and that some kids “don’t count.” At another charter, since closed, [the State identified egregious special education violations](#). Staff refused to screen students, tried to keep them from enrolling, put them in rooms with nothing to do, deprived students of their services, and faked records to cover it up. Yet another charter was [accused of telling students with disabilities to stay home](#).

Discipline has been an ongoing problem. One charter in 2012-2013 had a [suspension rate of 68% meaning over half of the student body was suspended](#) out of school at least once in a school year. In 2017 another charter [used handcuffs to restrain a 9 year old boy](#).

Fraud and mismanagement continue to plague New Orleans under the new system. A detailed [2015 report found systemic financial fraud and mismanagement](#) of millions of dollars in local charter schools. The report

documented numerous instances of fraud in charter schools in amounts ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars at ten different schools. These problems resulted from a dramatic underinvestment in oversight, reliance on self-reporting of fraud and mismanagement, insufficient auditing techniques, and understaffed and overworked auditors.

Transparency is a problem. The State of Louisiana has been [withholding basic school data about economic disadvantage and language](#) issues until a [recent court decision](#) made it public. There have been problems with lack of compliance with Open Meetings Law even into [2017](#). The overall [whiteness of the education reform movement in New Orleans](#), which has been pointed out by scholars, was also criticized at the NAACP forum. The authorization process for starting charter schools has been criticized by African Americans in New Orleans as [actively working to keep local African Americans from operating charter schools](#).

The NAACP was offered hours of painful evidence that the charter system has significant problems with transparency and accountability. These problems led [Representative Joseph Bouie of New Orleans](#), the head of the Louisiana Black Caucus and former Chancellor of Southern University in New Orleans to insist to the NAACP that the experiment of charters schools imposed on the children of New Orleans was similar to the [Tuskegee syphilis experiment](#) conducted on African Americans.

No doubt many students are being left behind in the charter school experiment. [Thousands of students](#) are attending schools rated C or below. According to a 2016 report on [Grades for the public schools](#) in New Orleans: 8 schools received F; 21 received D; 26 received C; 11 received B; 12 received A.

The [Stanford Center for Opportunity in Education](#) issued a report on the

[system in September 2015](#) which concluded: “Successful reform must also support school improvement in ways that ultimately create a set of schools that are worth choosing, in which every child will choose and be chosen by the schools that meet their needs. That system has not yet been created in New Orleans. Time will tell whether it can be developed. It is likely that acknowledging the realities of the experiences of the most vulnerable children is a necessary first step in that direction.

NOLA reforms have created a set of schools that are highly stratified by race, class and educational advantage; this impacts the assignment to schools and discipline in the schools to which students are assigned. Fully 89 percent of white students and 73 percent of Asian students in New Orleans attend Tier 1 schools. However, only 23.5% of African American students have access to these schools. And whereas 60% of students who are above the poverty line (i.e. those who can pay for their school lunch) attend Tier 1 schools, only 21.5% of students whose family income is low enough to be eligible to receive a free lunch have access to these schools. Not only do Tier 1 schools rank as the best in the city, they consistently rank among the best schools in the state of Louisiana.”

As the New York Times reported in an article titled “The Myth of the New Orleans School Makeover,” “The [New Orleans miracle is not all it seems](#). Louisiana state standards are among the lowest in the nation. The new research also says little about high school performance. And the average composite ACT score for the Recovery School District was just 16.4 in 2014, well below the minimum score required for admission to a four-year public university in Louisiana. There is also growing evidence that the reforms have come at the expense of the city’s most disadvantaged children, who often disappear from school entirely and, thus, are no longer included in the data.”

The students in the system are taking matters in their own hands. As [Rethink](#)

student leaders write: “Youth lives, voices, and futures are not being valued. A stand for justice needs to be took and the time is now! Youth are the experts and we deserve to be treated like we are... We want curriculum that represent us and people like us. We want input from youth of color on curriculum and teacher trainings. We want educational infrastructure to support youth entrepreneurship, youth cooperatives and business opportunities that support the communities we come from. And we want real youth and community input and veto power on all decisions regarding school openings, closings, leadership, and locations.”

The NAACP hearing certainly documented many of the problems. The question remains as to what will be done about them. The students are not waiting.