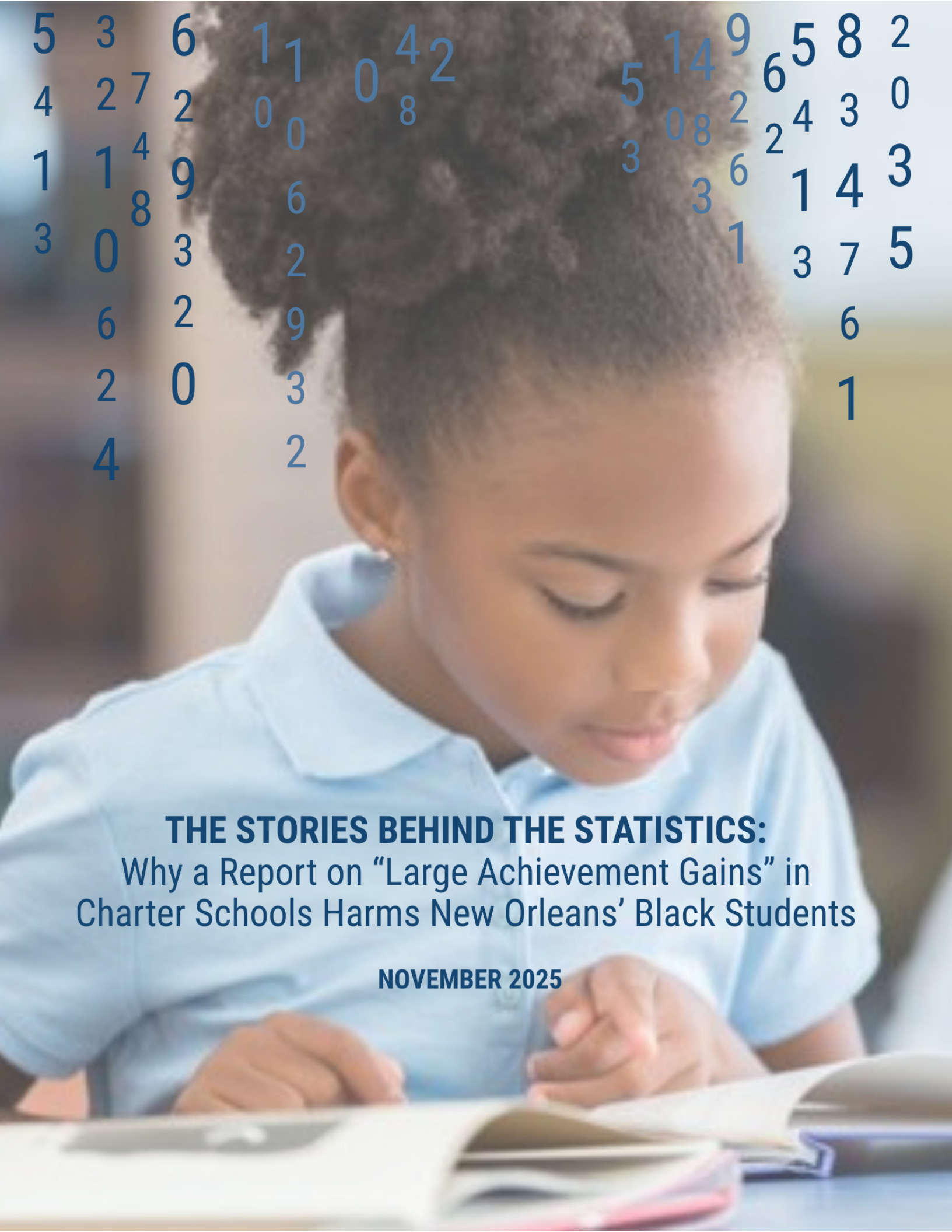




THE STORIES BEHIND THE STATISTICS:

Why a Report on “Large Achievement Gains” in
Charter Schools Harms New Orleans’ Black Students

NOVEMBER 2025

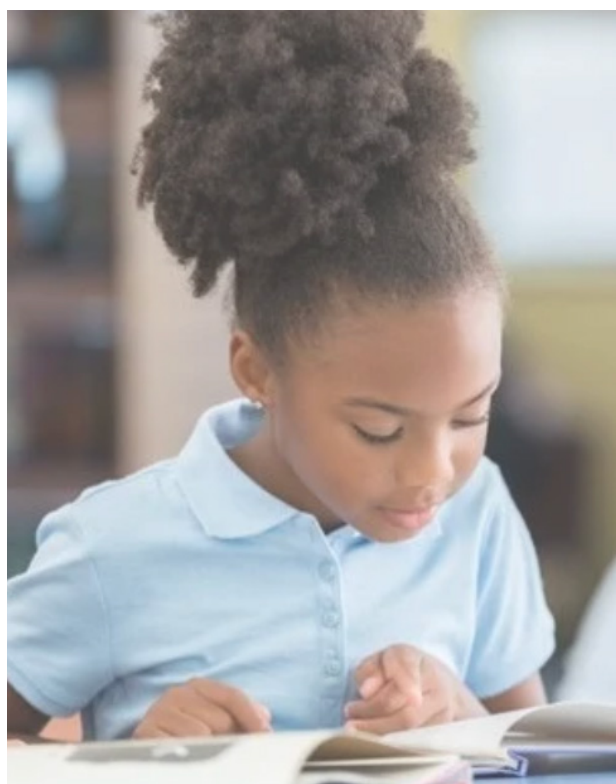
PREFACE

FOR THE 20-YEAR MEMORIAL OF HURRICANE KATRINA, Tulane University’s Education Research Alliance (ERA) for New Orleans widely disseminated a policy brief entitled *The New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms: 20 Years of Lessons*, which lauded “large gains in achievement” in the city’s all-charter school district. This critique offers an in-depth analysis of this claim by closely examining data in the brief and situating it in a wider context, including evidence that not only complicates the narrative of improvement but also questions the integrity of the data that researchers relied upon, the ways they leveraged it, the conclusions they reached, and the narrow metrics utilized. Additionally, ERA’s funding by private philanthropies engaged in charter school advocacy is examined alongside its expressed principle of objectivity in research.

Regarding charter school performance data in New Orleans, this paper questions ERA’s brief in several areas. First, it examines how the state has continuously altered the school performance metric to advantage charter schools and contrive “success” in New Orleans. Second, it raises questions regarding the integrity of the data analyzed by ERA researchers based on allegations, lawsuits, and violations involving grade-fixing and mismanagement in the New Orleans charter school sector. Third, it flags concerns about the performance data by highlighting the lack of charter school accountability and oversight by the state.

Finally, the paper turns to the brief’s student surveys on teaching quality and charter school climate, revealing that the experiences of black students at the school level are more troubling than ERA suggests. To illuminate problems, original qualitative data, including firsthand testimony of students and parents on their charter school experiences, are examined. This testimony reveals the inadequacies of statistical data presented in isolation from the lived realities of day-to-day life in New Orleans charter schools. Their reports are alarming.

To complicate the narrative of “improvement” fashioned by statisticians, the paper likewise offers a comparative analysis of school climate in a historic, pre-Katrina public school, drawing on original oral



PREFACE

history interviews and archival research. The differences between the climate of the historic, now-closed public school and that of current charter schools could not be more striking. Serious concerns are raised about charter students' right to learn and a punitive culture that prioritizes discipline over students' well-being and development.

Ultimately, this critique argues that the use of data in ERA's brief advances the interests of charter school advocates, rather than the students at the center of the reforms. ERA's claims of objectivity do not legitimize the brief's findings, generally produced in isolation from black communities and the experiential knowledge they possess. It is concluded that a singular focus on numbers as a measure of excellence in black education is inadequate and ignores the most significant aspects of schooling for black youth in New Orleans. In fact, the narrative of improvement falls short in demanding that black students' rights to educational equity be fully honored.



THE STORIES BEHIND THE STATISTICS:

Why a Report on “Large Achievement Gains” in Charter Schools Harms New Orleans’ Black Students

KRISTEN BURAS, PH.D.

2025

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She is committed to antiracist work that reflects the experiences, cultures, and histories of minoritized communities, with a focus on black education in New Orleans and the US South. Buras is the author of *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*. Additionally, she is coauthor, with veteran teachers and students, of *Pedagogy, Policy, and the Privatized City: Stories of Dispossession and Defiance from New Orleans*. Her most recent book is [*What We Stand to Lose: Black Teachers, the Culture They Created, and the Closure of a New Orleans High School*](#).



Buras has spent her career studying the nation’s first all-charter school district in her native city of New Orleans, with a focus on race, community experience, and charter school inequities. Her research has been published in *Harvard Educational Review*, *Peabody Journal of Education*, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, and elsewhere. Likewise, Buras has spoken by invitation at universities such as Columbia, Dillard, Fordham, Loyola, Harvard, and Tulane, and as part of community-based forums in Atlanta, Houston, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Nashville, and other cities.

She is past associate editor of the *Journal of Education Policy* and a fellow of the National Education Policy Center. Her other books include *Rightist Multiculturalism: Core Lessons on Neoconservative School Reform* and *The Subaltern Speak: Curriculum, Power, and Educational Struggles*, co-edited with Michael Apple. Her forthcoming co-edited book is *Education, Politics, and Power: Michael Apple, Schooling for Democracy, and the Struggles Ahead*.

Buras holds a doctorate in education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For more on her work, visit <https://kristenburas.com/>.

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URBAN SOUTH GRASSROOTS RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

Founded two decades ago, Urban South Grassroots Research Collective (USGRC) is a New Orleans coalition that melds community-based research with bottom-up organizing for racial and educational justice. USGRC is committed to research defined by, meaningful to, and consequential for racially marginalized communities and situates its work as part of a longer struggle for equity, civil rights, and social justice in the Deep South.



NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The National Center for Charter School Accountability provides research and recommendations on increasing transparency and accountability for charter schools. NCCSA is a project of the Network for Public Education.



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"The numbers" are omnipotent and often the only valid sources of data for many academicians, policymakers, and those most influential in the field of education. Both private and public funding sources demand that the "hard facts" of outcomes are provided through quantitative data... We give this data so much power, celebrating its purported objectivity and neutrality, that oftentimes we forget data — any data — is shaped by the sociopolitical context within which it arose.

— Alejandro Covarrubias and Verónica Vélez¹

[S]tatistical significance...is a construction that relies on many problematic underlying assumptions. While it can tell us whether our results fit into our hypothesized models — which are abstractions meant to represent reality, sometimes very poorly — it gives a specific meaning to the data that are framed within the parameters of accepted disciplinary norms. This narrowed framing limits opportunities for new insights.

— Alejandro Covarrubias et al.²

INTRODUCTION: IMAGES OF AUGUST 29, 2005

AUGUST 29TH, 2025, marked the 20-year memorial of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The anniversary may be over, but reports about the “success” of the city’s all-charter school district continue to be debated.³

After Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, Louisiana’s state-run Recovery School District (RSD) took over most of the city’s public schools. Over the next nine years, it closed them and contracted with private educational management organizations to operate charter schools.⁴ This move and associated reforms, such as firing all the city’s teachers, were touted as a solution for the “failure” of traditional teachers and public schools.⁵

Policymakers and charter school advocates at the local, state, and national levels framed the takeover as an initiative intended to uplift black students in New Orleans after decades of low achievement measured by test scores and graduation rates. Notably, little was said by reformers about longstanding white resistance to supporting black education. The chronic neglect of black public schools by white policymakers for more than a century was also ignored.⁶

The evening before the 20-year memorial, I watched Spike Lee’s documentary, “Katrina: Come Hell and High Water.”⁷ Image after image, I was reminded of the unspeakable tragedy of leaving the city’s black residents to die in flood waters and on rooftops. Government officials allowed yellow school buses to sit idle rather than utilizing them to transport families who could not afford to evacuate. With these images in mind — and the history of racism and disregard for black life that they represent — it is perplexing that some believe the school reforms following Katrina were intended to improve the city’s majority-black school system. What in those images would substantiate such a conclusion? There is a great deal of evidence to the contrary.⁸

“Unfortunately, racism was a central dynamic in teachers’ mass termination and the takeover of New Orleans public schools.”

In November 2005, three months after Katrina struck New Orleans, officials announced that 7,500 public school teachers and employees — most of them black — would be fired in early 2006.⁹ This move occurred in a city that needed to rebuild its public school system. At least 80 percent of the public schools in Orleans Parish had been either damaged or destroyed.¹⁰ Most of the students who attended those schools were also black.

Officials did not ask students, parents, teachers, or people in the most deeply affected communities, where homes and neighborhoods were wiped out, what they thought should happen amid such destruction. Instead, plans for rebuilding began in elite white policymaking and business circles before displaced black communities could return to

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New Orleans and be part of the dialogue about what would happen to their schools.¹¹

James Reiss, chair of the New Orleans Business Council and a member of the mayor's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, declared: "Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, politically, and economically."¹²

While there was sufficient evidence that the city's public schools were falling short by traditional measures, no evidence was provided to link those problems to the shortcomings of teachers.¹³ Notably, the history of racism in New Orleans, which included first denying enslaved blacks the right to an education and then strategically neglecting black public schools after their establishment, was not mentioned by officials.¹⁴

Rather than offering evidence of teachers' alleged faults, they were fired en masse without due process.¹⁵ A simple equation was offered that defined the problem and envisaged the solution: Traditional teachers and public schools should be removed and replaced with recruits to operate and teach in charter schools.

With veteran teachers removed, it followed that the "failing" public schools where they taught should be closed and charter schools opened. By 2014, the so-called reformers had reached their goal: RSD-New Orleans became the nation's first all-charter school district.¹⁶

Twenty years post-Katrina, the charter school achievement data in New Orleans appear to tell a story of success.¹⁷ The numbers produced by charter school operators, the state-run RSD, and researchers affiliated with pro-charter school foundations suggest that reforms have been largely effective. Standardized test scores are supposedly up. Graduation rates have allegedly risen. It seems difficult to argue with the numbers.

In what follows, I examine a [policy brief published by Tulane University's Education](#)



Figure 1: Decimated post-Katrina homes in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward (Photo Credit: Kristen Buras, 2006)

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[Research Alliance \(ERA\)](#) for the twentieth anniversary of Katrina.¹⁸ Based on a rational approach, which presumes that policies are based on neutral and systematic evidence to develop and refine interventions, researchers Douglas Harris and Jamie Carroll detail “lessons” to be learned about the city’s success in improving student outcomes through state takeover of the local school district, expansion of autonomous charter schools, and recruitment of new teachers.

I provide a critical review of the brief’s quantitative data, question the “objectivity” of the analysis and findings, and situate ERA’s brief within a broader pro-charter school movement supported by private philanthropic monies.

Recognizing that racism impacted policy formation and implementation, I then examine the data within the broader context of inequity. First, I consider how the state has continuously altered the school performance metric to advantage charter schools and create the illusion of “success.”

Second, I raise questions regarding the integrity of the “hard data” analyzed by ERA researchers based on allegations, lawsuits, and violations involving grade-fixing and mismanagement in the New Orleans charter school sector.

Third, I flag concerns about the performance data by highlighting the lack of charter school accountability and oversight by the state (and by the local school board after the schools transitioned out of the state-run RSD).¹⁹

Finally, I turn to the brief’s student surveys on teaching quality and charter school climate and reveal that black students’ experiences at the school level are more troubling than ERA suggests. Using original qualitative data, I detail student and parent testimony on their experiences at charter schools, revealing the limitations of statistical data presented in isolation from lived realities. I also comparatively use original research on a historic, pre-Katrina public school to complicate the narrative of “improvement” fashioned by statisticians.

The differences between the climate of a historic, now-closed public school and that of

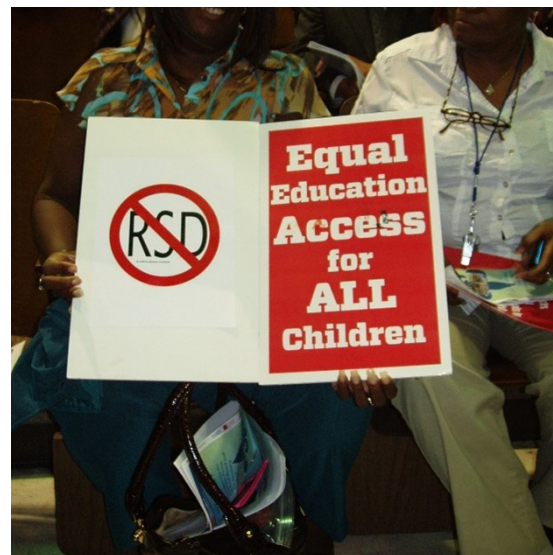


Figure 2. Community Member with anti-RSD protest sign at a public meeting in New Orleans with state education officials. (Photo Credit: Kristen Buras, 2010)

INTRODUCTION: IMAGES OF AUGUST 29, 2005

current charter schools could not be more striking. Concerns are raised about charter students' right to learn and a punitive culture that prioritizes discipline over students' well-being and development.

In the final analysis, I argue that the use of data in ERA's brief advances the interests of charter school advocates, rather than the students at the center of the reforms. ERA's claims of "objectivity" do not legitimize the brief's findings, generally produced in isolation from black communities and the experiential knowledge they possess.

I ultimately reveal that a singular focus on numbers as a measure of excellence in black education is inadequate and ignores the most significant aspects of schooling for black youth in New Orleans. In fact, the narrative of improvement falls short in demanding that black students' rights to educational equity be fully honored.

“... the narrative of improvement falls short in demanding that black students' rights to educational equity be fully honored.”



THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE'S 2025 BRIEF ON CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE

IN 2014, the Education Research Alliance (ERA) for New Orleans was formed at Tulane University to study the effects of dismantling the city's public school system and replacing it with charter schools. Headed by economist Douglas Harris, ERA has issued a series of reports, including its most recent on the two-decade-old charter school experiment in New Orleans. ERA describes itself as “a research center that collaborates with local education stakeholders to produce objective, rigorous, and useful research to inform the community's understanding of how to improve students' experiences in schools.” The brief indicates that reforms — the takeover of New Orleans public schools by the state-run RSD, followed by closures and mass charter school expansion — “led to large gains in average student achievement.”

What is presented portrays positive gains. However, the policy brief is incomplete, excluding data that would cast reforms in a less favorable light.

The brief opens with several charts on “improved student outcomes.” The first charts focus on state standardized testing in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). However, the charts only show pre- and post-reform test score changes in standard deviations, rather than the actual percentile rankings for specific achievement levels, which reveal a more accurate but dismal picture. The same follows for high school graduation rates shown in percentage point change pre- and post-reform, rather than the actual percentage of students graduating. Notably, for a brief issued in 2025, the charts stop at either 2012 or 2014, which masks that the “gains” plateaued thereafter. The truncated graphs show an upward trajectory, amorphously portraying improved test performance and graduation rates. As I will discuss, the reality is more complicated.

Another graph on improved student outcomes shows the New Orleans all-charter school district's ranking on a scale (1 to 68) that includes Louisiana's 68 public school districts (with 68 denoting the lowest ranking district in the state). ERA's graph denotes New Orleans' ranking on specific measures, including district-level averages of mathematics and ELA test scores in grades 3-8 and district-level high school graduation rates. New Orleans' district-level averages do not place it anywhere near the top districts in the state. When ranked for those “at [the] basic or above” level in math and ELA standardized tests, all-charter New Orleans is ranked between 40th and 57th in Louisiana, depending on the post-Katrina year reported (2015, 2021, and 2023). It ranked 67th in 2005 on the same metrics. In 2005, New Orleans ranked 63rd out of 68 for high school graduation rates; it ranked 56th in 2015 and 60th in 2021.

Although the ERA brief lauds the large improvements produced by New Orleans charter schools, the rankings indicate only marginal improvement in overall performance. The fact is, the city's schools remain at the bottom in comparison to most districts in Louisiana, even after the charter school takeover in New Orleans. The absolute failure

THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE'S 2025 BRIEF ON CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE

of the reforms is especially evident when considering that Louisiana's public schools are ranked among the lowest-performing in the nation. Put another way, charter schools are praised by ERA (and journalists who uncritically rely on ERA's reporting) for moving New Orleans from rock bottom to slightly less rock bottom — not just in Louisiana but nationally. By any standard, the “gains” presented by ERA are gradations of failure, which means that charter schools have not fundamentally improved the majority-black education system in New Orleans.

It is critical to dig even deeper. Since ERA uses district-level averages to characterize performance on standardized tests, this means that data from the highest-performing and selective, majority-white charter schools in New Orleans is included in the average. If reforms aimed to improve black education—this was the promise—then it is logical that the analysis would exclude white schools from the sample for test scores, graduation rates, and all other performance measures. The NOLA Public Schools annual report for 2024-2025 shows that majority-white Ben Franklin High School had only 33% economically disadvantaged students and a 95% mastery rate on state tests. The majority-white Willow School, which includes all grade levels, had 21% disadvantaged students and an 88% mastery rate. Schools like these are included in the district-level averages.

“No matter the spin, charter schools place New Orleans among the bottommost districts in Louisiana, a bottommost state.”

Problems with data presented in the brief should raise serious red flags about how New Orleans' schools were transformed through mass chartering and whether this is a model to be replicated.

The ERA brief notes that “school spending increased” by 13% in the post-Katrina charter sector when compared to pre-Katrina spending on traditional public schools. These additional monies went to “higher spending on [charter school] administration.” In fact, during the first decade of reform, the brief indicates, “instructional spending decreased by 10%.” This “top-heavy approach” in which “schools hired more managers and paid them higher salaries” means that new funding streams were not invested in resources for classroom instruction. These salaries continued “through 2018-2020.”

Next, the ERA brief describes shifts in the city's teaching force. It reads, “Teacher turnover increased, as did the share of teachers with low levels of experience.” Further, “the share of teachers with advanced credentials decreased.” The brief indicates that black teachers decreased from 71% in 2005 to 49% in 2014, then rose to 56% in recent years. They were paid less than white counterparts in the same teaching and administrative positions.

THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE'S 2025 BRIEF ON CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE

Finally, in terms of teaching quality, the ERA brief shows that students rated their teachers lower than students in a national comparison group on every dimension of teacher quality in 2018-19, including care and classroom management. Specifically, in 2018-19, “Black students [in New Orleans] reported less positive educational environments than White students.” They were more likely to feel that bullying was a problem, and their sense of school safety, fairness of discipline, emotional safety, and perception of equitable treatment was lower.

In summary, ERA researchers focus on what they consider to be impressive charter school achievement gains while downplaying the fact that New Orleans charter schools 1) pay higher salaries to administrators, rather than investing in instructional resources, 2) employ less experienced teachers who are transient, and 3) that black students in charter schools report a less positive educational climate than white students. Taken together, this contradicts what research consistently shows about the components of high-performing schools — experienced teachers, investment in school resources, and a supportive school climate.

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE AND NEW ORLEANS CHARTER SCHOOLS: ERA'S SELECTIVE USE OF DATA

There is another questionable claim at the end of the ERA policy brief. Researchers examine whether the “feared negative consequences” of charter schools occurred, such as exclusionary discipline practices leading more youth into the school-to-prison pipeline. The brief’s associated chart shows annual conviction rates for 7th to 9th graders from 2001-2012, revealing that rates in New Orleans charters from 2008-2012 were “lower in all but one year” compared to districts across Louisiana with similar characteristics.

A note below the figure on convictions states: “We focus on this age group [7th to 9th] to capture the effects of the reforms for students while they are still in school, excluding grades with higher dropout rates (10th to 12th grades).” Notably, scholars who study the school-to-prison pipeline have documented that dropping out of high school—or being pushed out—increases the likelihood that youth will become involved in the criminal justice system, a system in which youth of color are disproportionately represented. In New Orleans, over 95% of the youth arrested are black.

“The ERA brief shows that students rated their teachers lower than students in a national comparison group on every dimension of teacher quality in 2018-19, including care and classroom management.”

THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE'S 2025 BRIEF ON CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE

Despite existing research, ERA researchers focus on grades with more robust enrollment when youth are less likely to experience convictions and other markers of the school-to-prison pipeline. It follows that charters are not held accountable for dropouts/pushouts. By excluding grades 10-12, ERA overlooks older students who are more likely to suffer the consequences of charter schools' harsh discipline policies and are at a greater risk of involvement in the criminal justice system.

There is also a larger issue. Using the conviction rate for children who are 12 to 14 years of age to assess the “success” of education reform sets a low bar for how to measure whether schools are serving black students well. As I explain below, suspension and expulsion rates provide a more relevant or proximal measure.

It is well documented that suspensions and expulsions from school increase the chances that youth will have contact with the juvenile justice system—whether through arrests, convictions, or incarceration. It is more useful, therefore, to examine rates of suspension and expulsion in New Orleans charter high schools. While conviction is a later node in the school-to-prison pipeline, suspensions and expulsions are earlier nodes with serious implications for youth. The Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL) explains, “Suspensions matter because they are among the leading indicators of whether a child will drop out of school, and because an out-of-school suspension increases a child’s risk for future incarceration.”

For the post-Katrina period discussed by ERA, 2008-2012, the Southern Poverty Law Center noted that in New Orleans, approximately 95% of all out-of-school suspensions (OSS) were for non-violent and minor disruptions. Despite this, a report issued by the JJPL on suspensions in 2013 revealed that:

- Louisiana’s average for OSS was 30% higher than the national average.
- Over half (52%) of “failing schools” in New Orleans had an OSS rate at or above the state average of 9.2%.
- Since 2009, RSD direct-run schools and RSD charter schools have suspended students at rates that are sometimes double and triple the state average.
- From 2009-2010 to 2011-2012, New Orleans had numerous “hot spot” schools with an OSS rate at or above 20%. Most were high schools in the RSD.
- In 2011-2012, 34% of schools in New Orleans had an OSS rate at or above 20%.
- In 2012-2013, there were two schools in New Orleans with an OSS rate over 60%.

These numbers, based on data from the Louisiana Department of Education, should be a central concern.

According to Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children, disciplinary data on New Orleans charter schools underreport such issues. For example, the

THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE'S 2025 BRIEF ON CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE

Times-Picayune, the city's major newspaper, found that "data published by the Louisiana Department of Education vastly underreported the number of expulsions in charter schools." For the 2007-2008 period, state data from a sample of 19 RSD charter schools listed only 4 students as having been expelled. The principal at Lafayette Academy charter school, however, told the *Times-Picayune* that 14 students were expelled that year; the state reported zero for Lafayette. Other similar disparities were found.

In New Orleans, over 95% of the children arrested are black and in 2024, Louisiana spent around \$155,000 per incarcerated child.

Regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, legal scholars Catherine Kim, Daniel Losen, and Damon Hewitt emphasize:

At its core, the pipeline results from the failure of public institutions to meet the educational and social development needs of a large segment of the children... These deficiencies increase students' disengagement and the likelihood of their dropping out and later becoming involved with the courts. Even worse, some schools may actually encourage dropouts in response to unintended pressures from test-driven accountability regimes, which create incentives to push out low-performing students to boost overall test scores...The youth who suffer disproportionately from these practices...[include] low-income students [and] students of color.

The problems that I have examined in the ERA brief show that its presentation of evidence is not objective or neutral. These problems include the data used in and excluded from the analysis (e.g., specific grade levels) as well as the units used (e.g., district-level averages tied to a statewide sliding scale as opposed to a breakdown of school-level data in the district). The representation of findings was likewise problematic (e.g., standard deviations as opposed to absolute scores or rates at benchmark performance levels). There are also issues with the interpretation and prioritization of data (e.g., test score gains emphasized over qualitative concerns about school climate, or achievement gains interpreted in a statewide context only). In fact, ERA is co-located with charter school advocates in New Orleans and receives substantial funding from national charter school supporters, as the next section of this paper will explain.

THE FUNDING OF NEW ORLEANS CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE

IN 2012, the pro-charter school Arnold Foundation invested \$15 million to advance education reform in New Orleans, giving generous funding to the Black Alliance for Educational Options, Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), and Teach for America (TFA)–New Orleans, among others.⁶⁰ The Arnold Foundation next announced another \$25 million education initiative to be managed by the Charter School Growth Fund and NSNO.⁶¹

Notably, in 2014, the Arnold Foundation issued grants to Tulane University “to improve the quality of education data available to the public, researchers, and educators in New Orleans.”⁶² From 2014-2017, \$2.8 million was dispersed; from 2016-2019, another \$740,000; and from 2017-2022, an additional \$1.4 million.⁶³ ERA lists the Arnold Foundation among its funders.⁶⁴ Grants from this consistently pro-charter foundation helped launch and sustain ERA’s work.

ERA’s funding from a foundation that is known for its charter school advocacy raises questions about its operational tenets, including “We strive for objectivity,” which means “avoiding public advocacy for specific policies and programs.” ERA likewise professes, “We believe that values are informed by experiences and vary from person to person,” meaning “we aim to avoid centering a particular set of values or experiences in our work.”⁶⁵

In 2018, Arnold issued a press release announcing a new non-profit to “enhance” education reform efforts. The City Fund, a \$200 million venture with Reed Hastings of Netflix, would “work with cities that are interested in learning from the successes of cities such as Denver, Washington, DC, and New Orleans.”⁶⁶ One of City Fund’s early leaders was NSNO’s former CEO Neerav Kingsland.⁶⁷ Arnold’s press release also emphasized the need to “partner with researchers to see if public education improves for all children.”⁶⁸ The press release links to a report by ERA’s Douglas Harris, which “found evidence of positive impacts.”⁶⁹

In 2023, Harris received \$975,000 in funds for the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH) to support a research project on the system-level effects of charter schools at the national level.⁷⁰ Scholar and Network for Public Education President Diane Ravitch reflected on REACH’s funding:

When Betsy DeVos was Secretary of Education, she gave \$10 million to establish a research center on school choice; she chose carefully. Given who she is, she was not likely to give the money to academics likely to throw cold water on her life’s work. She gave the grant to Tulane...in the middle of the only city that has no public schools. The organization she funded is [REACH], led by economist Douglas Harris...

THE FUNDING OF NEW ORLEANS CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE

Two of the nation's most active funders of charter schools just awarded nearly \$1 million to REACH: the Walton Foundation and the City Fund.

Walton is the single largest private funder of charter schools in the nation. The City Fund was created by billionaires Reed Hastings... and John Arnold... specifically to spur the growth of charter schools.⁷¹

ERA and REACH are funded in large part by a network of pro-charter school foundations and organizations; in turn, their research helps legitimize the expansion of charter schools, a leading priority of the funding entities.

The connection between ERA and the charter school movement in New Orleans is not only financial, but physical. ERA is co-located on Tulane University's campus at 1555 Poydras Street, along with NSNO and other pro-charter school initiatives.

Prior to its co-location with ERA, NSNO was co-located with Tulane University's Cowen Institute, a predecessor to ERA. The institute was founded by Scott Cowen, Tulane's president, who headed the education committee of Mayor Nagin's *Bring New Orleans Back Commission*, organized to plan the city's rebuilding. Cowen was joined on the education committee by a past local and state education board member (who assisted legislators in creating the RSD) and the head of TFA in New Orleans. In early 2006, the education committee released a landmark report recommending that New Orleans become the nation's first all-charter school district.⁷²

The Cowen Institute was launched in 2007 as an "action-oriented think tank that informs and advances solutions — through policies, programs, and partnerships — to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education."⁷³ When I conducted interviews with Cowen's staff in 2009, I asked about the institute's mission. Like ERA, they characterized their work as neutral. One staff member shared: "We don't advocate for an all-charter system because we don't feel there's adequate research [at this point] to indicate that charters will outperform non-charters." Instead, the staff portrayed the Cowen Institute as an "honest broker" and "objective observer." Yet, NSNO, TFA, and other pro-charter school groups were given free office space in the same suite as the Cowen Institute. ERA has continued this tradition.

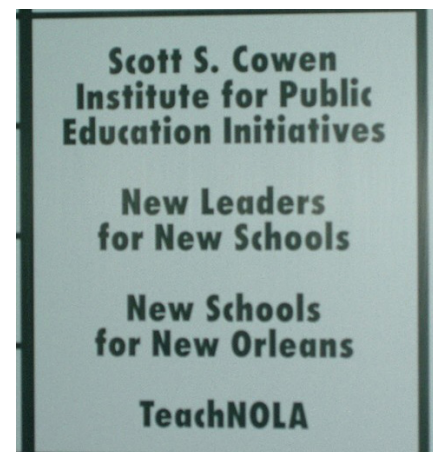


Figure 3: Cowen Institute Signage at Tulane University
(Photo Credit: Kristen Buras, 2009)

THE CHANGING METRICS OF CHARTER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE, ACADEMIC FRAUD, AND ACCOUNTABILITY: WHAT THE ERA BRIEF IGNORES

IN 2019, almost half the charter schools in New Orleans were rated D or F by the state.⁷⁴ On the twentieth anniversary of Katrina, when the national media turned its attention to New Orleans, there were no F-rated charters. This is mainly due to changes in metrics, as explained below. There were only seven A-rated schools and 13 B-rated schools. The majority (70%) received grades of C (36) or D (14) in 2024-2025.⁷⁵ In short, after two decades of reform, most New Orleans charter schools are rated C or D despite big promises of excellence by reformers and harsh criticism of pre-Katrina public schools.

CHANGING METRICS

The state's formula for measuring school performance has continuously morphed over the past 20 years. Before Katrina, the cut point for failure was 60 on a scale of 200. After Katrina, through Act 35, the state legislature raised the cut point to 87.4, just below the state average, to maximize the number of public schools that the RSD could seize.⁷⁶ Then, as charter schools were opened, the cut point for failure was lowered back to 60. Put another way, the standard used to justify the takeover of traditional public schools was not the same standard used to judge the performance of charter schools that replaced them; the standard for charters was lower.⁷⁷

Additionally, the state has repeatedly revised the metrics used to calculate the school performance score (SPS) or letter grades. For example, in 2012-2013, attendance and dropout figures were no longer included in calculating the SPS, and a “bonus system” was introduced to reward schools serving low-performing students for progress on state-mandated assessments.

Together, these changes translated into low-performing schools receiving higher letter grades without substantially improving their performance. The local *Times-Picayune* newspaper reported on gains in letter grades this same year:

*Some long-subpar schools saw absolutely jaw-dropping gains. Of the 67 schools that had 2012 letter grades, 12 jumped two or more grades. Eight elementary schools climbed from F to C...[Two elementary schools] shot from F to B.*⁷⁸

Over time, the standard has gone from measuring achievement in absolute terms based on performance benchmarks to incorporating growth over time. This standard was not afforded to pre-Katrina public schools. In fact, the new metric for 2025-2026 includes “growth” or improvement from the previous year in mathematics and English Language Arts, especially for the lowest performing students.⁷⁹

For high schools specifically, in 2024-2025, the growth index only counted as 12.5% of the school performance score. In 2025-2026, the new formula counts “growth” as 42%, “achievement” or proficiency on state tests as 33%, and “thriving” or on-time graduation

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and readiness on national exams as 25% in calculating a school's overall score.⁸⁰ Similarly, reformers' promises over time have shifted from guarantees of success to pledges of incremental improvement.

ERA researchers are rarely explicit about changes over time in the state's accountability system. Yet, these changes can produce improvement through formulaic alterations as opposed to performance data reflecting actual changes in charter school performance.⁸¹

ACADEMIC FRAUD

ERA researchers analyze those numbers provided by charter operators and the state, without checking for evidence of data corruption. If the data that researchers analyze is compromised, then their findings will likewise be compromised and invalid.

In the New Orleans charter sector, multiple cases of academic and financial fraud have occurred, not to mention reports issued on potential breaches in maintaining accurate records of student performance. Some cases have been penalized by the state and/or litigated in court, while others have not been thoroughly investigated. Consider the examples below from New Orleans and their implications for claims about charter school "success."

“ This same charter school was found to be inappropriately using the special education designation for students to secure monies for a \$300,000 budgeting problem. ”

To be clear, the following cases were made public post-2014, but in most cases, the problems that surfaced predated this period. Moreover, while a good part of ERA's analysis focuses on the first decade of reforms,⁸² researchers also compare New Orleans' all-charter district to the performance of districts statewide in 2015, 2021, and 2023, and make numerous broad claims based on patterns in performance data across an array of ERA studies completed after 2014. Harris and Carroll explain that “key conclusions [in the brief] are based not only on our individual findings but also on patterns across our studies,”⁸³ and further assert that “student outcomes remained stable” from 2016-2019, with some declines associated with COVID-19.⁸⁴ There is no indication that ERA researchers accounted for well-known instances of charter school fraud when analyzing data.

TESTING VIOLATIONS

In 2015, leaders of SciTech Academy in the ReNEW Schools charter network committed testing violations. Administrators requested that teachers review secure testing materials and retain students based on concerns for school-wide test performance; they allowed students to take tests for one another, at home, or multiple times.⁸⁵ This same

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charter school was found to be inappropriately using the special education designation for students to secure monies for a \$300,000 budgeting problem.⁸⁶ ReNEW leaders who received the whistleblower's reports did nothing for months.⁸⁷ Test data like this should be excluded in estimating achievement.

SUSPECT DROPOUT DATA

"The Uncounted," a 2015 article, raised questions about student enrollment data in New Orleans charter schools.⁸⁸ In Louisiana, dropouts are coded a specific way for the purpose of measuring school performance. Students coded as "transferred out of state" were excluded from the state's metric. The inordinate use of the latter code by charters seemed to be masking the true dropout figures. Dropout figures, which are self-reported by schools, affect graduation rates and thus a school's rating. Multiple RSD administrators reported this coding pattern was common and posed concerns. Graduation rates have been tallied using these numbers.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated issues. Ongoing scandals, investigations, lawsuits, and forensic research suggest that problems like this may be more widespread.

A CHEATING INVESTIGATION AND PLUNGING TEST SCORES

In 2013-2014, end-of-course (EOC) test scores, which determined if students would graduate and accounted for one-fourth of the state's metric, were superlative at Landry-Walker High School, operated by the Algiers Charter School Association. However, there were discrepancies between high EOC scores and other academic results that year. Moreover, the difference from the previous year's EOC scores was astonishing.⁸⁹

- At Landry-Walker, 78% of students scored "good" or "excellent" on the biology EOC and 78% on the geometry EOC. Only "good" or "excellent" scores earn points on the state's metric.⁹⁰ Yet, 52 of the 257 students who scored "good" or "excellent" on the EOC exam received a D or F in the class.⁹¹
- Prior to testing, a Landry-Walker teacher sent an email to the school's test coordinator entitled, "Hot off the press." An attached file included three actual questions from the state geometry exam.⁹²
- In 2014-2015, after a cheating investigation was launched privately by the Algiers Charter School Association and test monitors were installed, only 9% of students aced biology and 27% geometry.⁹³
- In 2015-2016, Landry-Walker teachers were informed that "a portion of performance pay for staff will be tied to the EOC RESULTS."⁹⁴
- By 2017, the Louisiana inspector general's office had uncovered enough evidence of criminal wrongdoing at Landry-Walker that the local district attorney was alerted.⁹⁵

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CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT ON GRADE FIXING AND GROSS MISMANAGEMENT

In 2019, John Kennedy High School, operated by New Beginnings charter network, informed almost half the seniors *after* graduation that they were ineligible to graduate. A Kennedy data analyst first reported that some students' Algebra grades were improperly changed from failing to passing; he was terminated.⁹⁶ Changing grades from fail to pass influence the school's graduation rate and thus its state performance rating.

A lawsuit was filed with an appeal for class action status, as many of the “graduates” were required to return to school to complete missing credits.⁹⁷ The petition for damages notes the incorrect coding of classes, missing grades from previous semesters, and missing final grades. It alleges gross mismanagement and negligence by the charter school operator; the case is still being litigated and has expanded to other graduating classes.⁹⁸

Following the Kennedy debacle, which prompted New Beginnings to forfeit its contract, Orleans Parish school superintendent Henderson Lewis called for a citywide audit of the charter high schools overseen by Orleans Parish School Board.⁹⁹ (By this time, charter schools in the RSD had transitioned to oversight by the local board.¹⁰⁰) However, the superintendent's audit only covered about 5% of high school student files from the 2019-2020 school year.¹⁰¹ According to audit reports, some charters failed to maintain up-to-date student records; others were missing standardized and course test scores; in some cases, proof of credits earned for classes was missing.¹⁰²

At a school board meeting, Lewis assured the public that problems like those at Kennedy were not widespread, but he offered no evidence to support his conclusion.¹⁰³

ALLEGATIONS CONCERNING THE INTEGRITY OF ACADEMIC RECORDS

In 2021, I published a study in the [Journal of Law and Education \(JLED\)](#) on three charter schools in New Orleans' Collegiate Academies network—Sci Academy, Carver Collegiate, and Carver Prep.¹⁰⁴ I interviewed a subset of students, parents, and teachers regarding their charter experiences during the period 2012-2017, completed a forensic audit of student transcripts, and made public records requests from the Louisiana Department of Education. There were multiple allegations made by students and parents concerning the integrity of students' academic records, including but not limited to:

- *Fabrication*: listing and crediting classes never taken;
- *Fabrication-Duplication*: placing students in the same class more than once simultaneously, titling the duplicated class differently on the transcript, and crediting both;
- *Abridged Instruction*: listing and crediting classes as year-long (or extended) courses of study when substantially shorter periods of instructional time were offered;

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- *Transcript Scrubbing*: issuing grades and credits for classes, which appear on the transcript but are later removed from the record;
- *Grade Fixing*: changing a final class grade from failing to passing by altering academic records;
- *Grade Rescaling*: using an internal grading scale, inconsistent with the state's uniform grading scale for regular classes, which rewards lower percentile scores with higher letter grades.

One teacher stated: "I think one of the reasons I don't like charters is there is a tremendous amount of pressure to get the SPS (School Performance Score) to look a certain way...a lot of it just comes from we have to get certain numbers to stay open."¹⁰⁵

Prior to the article's publication, the Collegiate Academies network was shaken by a scandal involving Sci Academy. Details were first reported by local news outlets, then later documented in a defamation lawsuit filed by the assistant principal at the center of the scandal:

- In 2019, a Sci Academy assistant principal sent an email to faculty entitled "Fix Your Gradebook." It stipulated that "(less than) 10% [of students] should have a D/F." It further stated, "Go into your gradebook and find any assignment where more than 33% of students got a D/F. Give those assignments a weight of zero. They will still appear in the gradebook but they will not hurt students' grades."¹⁰⁶
- The school denied grade fixing, and the assistant principal was characterized as exercising poor judgment.¹⁰⁷ In turn, she filed a defamation lawsuit against the Orleans Parish School Board and Collegiate Academies, asserting that rather than reflecting her poor judgment, the email reflected the charter network's longtime grading policies.¹⁰⁸
- During her tenure, she received numerous documents that explicitly laid out grading policies. [Exhibit C of her legal petition is a twelve-page grading policy issued by Sci Academy](#), which outlines "remedies" for course grade distributions that do not meet the target. It opens, "Within each class, teachers have a wide degree of latitude in defining how their course grades are calculated."¹⁰⁹ The remainder of the policy outlines an array of methods to ensure grade distributions in which "no scholars get Ds or Fs in your course."¹¹⁰ The grading policy is worth a close read.

This and the cases above suggest that school performance data on New Orleans charter schools is at least partly corrupted. This same data is utilized nonetheless in substantiating claims that the city's charters have made significant achievement gains.

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ACCOUNTABILITY

Another problem with the charter school data used by ERA researchers is the gaping holes in the state accountability system. Although charter schools in New Orleans are promoted as a model based on “autonomy for accountability,” charters have near-complete autonomy with limited state oversight.

In a 2017 report that evaluated the Louisiana Department of Education’s charter school monitoring, the Louisiana Legislative Auditor (LLA) “slammed” the department. It was criticized for only conducting announced visits, except for those conducted due to parent concerns or formal complaints. The department was critiqued for weighing critical and non-critical violations equally in the monitoring process.¹¹¹

An earlier 2011 LLA report on charter schools under the Louisiana Department of Education and RSD concluded that state entities “did not effectively monitor [charter schools] in fiscal year 2010 [FY 2010] and need to improve the process to annually collect, review, and/or evaluate [their] performance,” including “student, financial, and legal/contractual performance.” Only 10 of 48 charters in the RSD were monitored for legal/contractual compliance. Of the 10, seven received one-year extensions and were put on probation, and another forfeited its charter.¹¹²

A report issued in 2015 warned that the Louisiana Department of Education’s Bureau of Internal Audit — the department that ensures charter oversight policies are applied and education funds are safeguarded for 1,400 public schools statewide — had only three employees: a director, a staff auditor, and a student worker.¹¹³

In the end, academic fraud at the charter school level should not be overlooked for its part in producing “gains” in New Orleans. Until such allegations are thoroughly investigated, litigated, or prevented through appropriate state oversight, the numbers coming out of New Orleans should be regarded with great caution.

MORE THAN TEST SCORES: THE NEED FOR STUDENTS' EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

TEST SCORES ARE A POOR SUBSTITUTE for educational realities and an inadequate measure of excellence in black education. For statisticians, numbers are a pristine tool, a gold standard. Yet, it is unwise to gather and interpret numeric data without context. Numbers should be validated through in-depth engagement with the communities they describe. What have community members *experienced*? How do *they* assess the quality of their schooling? Such engagement may change researchers' understanding of what should be measured and how data is interpreted.

In their brief, ERA researchers present quantitative data uncritically and without context. The only data that directly relate to student experience are ERA survey data on teaching quality¹¹⁴ and school climate.¹¹⁵ ERA surveys showed that New Orleans students rated their teachers lower on various dimensions than students nationally, especially on caring and classroom management.¹¹⁶ Additionally, regarding school climate, "Black students reported less positive educational environments than White students."¹¹⁷ This included student ratings on bullying, school safety, fairness of discipline, emotional safety, and perceptions of equitable treatment.¹¹⁸

Yet, these findings do not change researchers' overarching conclusion that the reforms have improved schools. Quantitative data overrides qualitative data, even when qualitative data suggests a disturbing trend. It remains unclear how black students can thrive academically when they do not feel cared for or fairly treated.

To move beyond the test score metric and better understand what students have experienced, I studied George Washington Carver Senior High School, an all-black public high school in New Orleans that opened in 1958 (hereafter *historic Carver*). I likewise studied its history post-Katrina, including its takeover, reopening, and closure by the RSD. To do this, I collected archival documents and interviewed alumni and teachers from historic Carver over the school's 50-year history from 1958 to 2005, when Katrina struck (Appendices A and B). The study was guided by three key questions:

- What was it like to be a student or teacher at Carver, including experiences inside and outside the classroom?
- What was the culture of Carver and how did specific traditions contribute to it?
- Based on student and teacher experience, did Carver successfully educate students?

At the same time, I studied three post-Katrina schools in the Collegiate Academies charter school network—Sci Academy, Carver Collegiate, and Carver Prep (the same schools discussed earlier). The latter two were co-located on Carver's historic site after Katrina and assumed its name amid the RSD's phase-out and closure of the historic school.¹¹⁹ Again, I collected documents, interviewed students, parents, and teachers, and asked the

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same kinds of questions, only this time about their charter school experiences from 2012 to 2017 (Appendix C).¹²⁰

How did students' experiences at the historic Carver compare with those who attended post-Katrina charter schools?

COMPARING THE HISTORIC CARVER SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL WITH POST-KATRINA CHARTER SCHOOLS

Students of historic Carver described a public school where black teachers nurtured an intergenerational culture of self-determination, high achievement, and enduring community traditions rooted in mutual care and concern. They also reported that teachers taught more than subject matter; they taught the whole person, meeting students' developmental needs as adolescents in addition to providing guidance on how as black people to navigate and challenge racism. All of this fostered a community of heartfelt feelings and belonging. Teachers at historic Carver created this culture despite chronic neglect of black public schools by white policymakers. I chronicle this legacy in [*What We Stand to Lose: Black Teachers, the Culture They Created, and the Closure of a New Orleans High School*](#).¹²²

Comparatively, students described charter schools where mostly white teachers endorsed a culture of detached individualism, ignoring or severing connections between past, present, and future generations. Rather than embracing an ethic of self-direction and achievement, the charters emphasized disciplinary adherence and authority. A single-minded focus on college preparation dominated the schools, with little regard for students' life circumstances beyond school or their holistic development as African American youth. Instead of developing meaningful community traditions, the charters fostered cult-like rituals, mandating participation in repeated practices centered on compliance. All of this fostered a culture of alienation, anxiety, and abuse in which students felt dehumanized.¹²³ Charter school operators did this with millions of dollars flowing into the newly marketized sector.¹²⁴

A 1974 graduate of historic Carver described the intergenerational connections that linked students with their teachers. He reflected on his music teacher, Yvonne Busch:

*I was hearing the name Yvonne Busch from the time I was in elementary school. Whenever I picked up an instrument, that's when I started hearing her name ringing, ringing: Yvonne Busch, Yvonne Busch... She knew me also because of my family. Ms. Busch was raised in the neighborhood... I was in touch with her until she passed away a couple of years ago...She was, maybe, now 85.*¹²⁵

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Figure 4: Culture and Climate Compared

Historic Carver Senior High School	Collegiate Academies Charter Schools
Intergenerational Network: sustaining meaningful relationships over time that connect past, present, and future generations	Detached Individualism: encouraging a “bootstraps” mentality in which individual goals are paramount and intergenerational connections are ignored
Self-Determination and Achievement: fostering a sense of inner authority and intrinsic capacity premised on high expectations of achievement and related support	Disciplinary Adherence and Authority: fostering extrinsic motivation through an unquestioning respect for authority and rigid behavioral expectations enforced by punishment
Dual Commitment to Academic Content and Civic Consciousness: valuing traditional measures of education, including content mastery, while also demonstrating concern for development of the whole person in the context of racism	Single-Minded Focus on College Preparation: valuing traditional measures of education only, such as test performance, while demonstrating little concern for students’ holistic development or life circumstances
Community Building Traditions: participating in culturally rooted practices and programs that facilitate mutual association and shared mission	Cult-Like Rituals and Routines: engaging in repeated practices that facilitate uniformity and unthinking compliance with a school leader or stipulated mission
Positive Feeling and Affiliation: possessing positive emotions and feelings of well-being in relation to a wider community of belonging, affiliation, and commitment	Alienation-Anxiety-Abuse: exhibiting negative emotions and a lack of well-being in relation to a wider community, perpetuated via separation and degradation

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Black teachers fostered relationships with students that stood the test of time. Clarence Righteous, who taught horticulture from 1972-2005, referred to teaching his “grandchildren,” meaning that when his students later had children, he taught them and considered them to be part of Carver’s multigenerational family.¹²⁶

By comparison, a Collegiate Academies charter student recalled with his mother the ethos of detached individualism that pervaded his school. He described teachers’ responses when students expressed dissatisfaction with what they felt was “mistreatment” by teachers. Rather than listening to the students in their care because student well-being is understood as inseparable from their own and that of the broader community, he recollected: “Teachers were like if you guys don’t go to school, it don’t matter. *We already got our degrees.*”¹²⁷ His mother chimed in with another well-worn line used by teachers, “*We[re] getting paid anyway. Don’t forget that part.*”¹²⁸ Charter school teachers, mostly white and from outside the community, did not claim students as their own.

At the historic Carver, teachers fostered a sense of inner authority in students while communicating high expectations of achievement. Carver’s first principal wrote in the 1962 yearbook:

*We, the faculty, dedicate ourselves to INTELLIGENT SELF-DIRECTION. Discipline has its origins in the term DISCIPLE (one who adopts the standards and values of another person who is admired and respected.) Discipline, to each “Carverite,” connotes a type of internal self-control, self-reliance, and self-assurance. To us as a faculty, discipline does not necessarily mean punishment, nor does it denote the various techniques... by which a teacher maintains an orderly situation.*¹²⁹

A 1981 graduate described her English teacher’s influence on her sense of intellectual possibility:

*[Ms. Smith-Tate] made us want to do better. She made us challenge ourself...Those teachers, they saw in you what you didn’t see in yourself...The world was yours if you listened to those teachers. I started thinking, “I’m really smart ‘cause they’re saying I am. Because they say I am.”*¹³⁰

Students received messages from teachers about their capabilities, which motivated them to excel.

In a telling comparison, a Collegiate Academies student described why he at first wanted to attend one of the chartered Carvers, thinking it would reflect the rich culture of the historic school that pre-dated Katrina—and why he quickly grew discouraged:

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I really went to [the charter] Carver because my grandmother went to [the historic] Carver and my mother went to [the historic] Carver, so I just wanted to relive the tradition 'cause they said how good it was...and I wanted to have the same experience...

[But in the charter school classroom] you had to sit straight up and look at your teachers. No arm on the desk...They'll tell you one time and if you don't listen the first time, they'll send you in the hall and talk to you. You do it again, you're going home...

It took me about a week to really be fed up...I feel like the school was really mostly disciplining than really teaching—period. They'll wait to see you do something wrong. I feel like they'll criticize you more than uplift you.¹³¹

Rather than developing students' sense of inner authority, teachers demanded unwavering respect for externally imposed authority. For students, the school focused on discipline to the detriment of their education.

Distinctions likewise surfaced when students characterized teachers' pedagogy. At historic Carver, teachers taught more than academic content. A student who graduated in 1962 recalled how his science teacher Lamar Smith “taught chemistry, but he always had this life lesson.”¹³² A 1965 graduate captured teachers' commitment to instructing students on more than subject matter. Upon graduating, the student explained: “You feel you were ready for the world. You had street sense, and you had book sense. You knew how to maneuver through the system.”¹³³ Similarly, a 1991 graduate recalled her social studies teacher, Lenora Condoll, who emphasized more than names and dates on a history test:

[She] always talked about having your voice heard...It can be something as simple as a... check on the paper in the voting booth. She said, there are so many ways our youth don't get their voices heard and it would be a good way to exercise your right after so many have fought for you to have it. It was one of the reasons that I registered to vote.¹³⁴

For teachers, the civic consciousness of students was as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic. They addressed all facets of student development and the wider world.

In charter schools, students reported a single-minded focus on test scores and college preparation. One student recalled, “It was talk throughout the whole [9th grade] year, make sure that y'all do this to pass your EOCs (End-of-Course exams required by the state), EOC, EOC, EOC.”¹³⁵ He complained that classes never addressed “What are you

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going to do with your life?” and instead were “too focused on standardized testing, and once you got past standardized testing, there wasn’t much more that the school offered.” He went on to explain an even deeper dynamic. “For students,” he continued, “[college] wasn’t a big enough purpose. It wasn’t really their own. [Teachers’] emphasis on taking tests so you get to the next grade, get to the next grade, get to college, it wasn’t self-motivating.”¹³⁶ The larger meaning of education to students’ personhood seemed to be missing.

Historic Carver was a place where culturally rooted traditions brought students and teachers together and facilitated mutual association. The school’s annual talent show is a prime example. The 1981 graduate, mentioned earlier, shared:

*[Talent Shows] were still a tradition. [It] was like going to a concert...You had to prepare. [Everyone] had their outfits ready. They prepare like a year before. Since we were all such a close community, we had our churches and our neighborhoods, you always knew who could sing...They had a panel and you had to have somebody to judge all of it. We would be howling and screaming and clapping. That was the best thing in the world.*¹³⁷

Additionally, there were other programs — marching band, sports, choir, drama, year-book, student council, and more — that brought students together and cultivated a shared identity.

Students’ experiences at the charter schools were strikingly different. Rather than community building traditions, students were socialized into cult-like rituals and routines embedded in the disciplinary “No Excuses” model. One student lamented:

*You must walk in a line. I just be like — I’m walk any kinda way. Walk in a straight line, walk in a straight line. I said, “Man, really?” The place not that big, tell you the truth. I feel like I’m in elementary [school] or something, like we treated [as] little boys. That irritatin’, man. I’m supposed to be in high school. You posed to [at] least have a little bit of freedom.*¹³⁸

Another student described cult-like routines and the consequences for anything less than total compliance:

*You have to wait for the principal to get on the bus, give us a greeting and then we had to say, “Good Morning,” back to him, and if we didn’t respond, he’ll make the bus go back around and sit in line again. I remember that happened on my bus at least three times. He made the bus go back around at least three times.*¹³⁹

Yet another charter student recalled a “chant song” that he and his peers had to “recite

every morning” about being successful.¹⁴⁰ In the same vein, one student reflected that the charter had “cult ways” and “was a little worried” because “they trying to brainwash me.”¹⁴¹

They would not allow you to just sit down and give up. They're gonna let you know [when you need to push yourself]... That's

Survival
Vouch for Each Other
Nurturing
Beautiful
Take My Children
Be Known
Network
Forever
Friendship
Sense of Community
Laugh So Hard
Strong Spirit
Rewarding
Great Time
Special Time
Motivation
Not Just Words But Feelings
Cared
Blessed
Family
Felt Good
Strength
Resilient
Values
Good Things
Remember Those Days
Safe
Home
Camaderie
Glimpse of Light
Best
Kinfolk
Encouragement
Positive
Bonding
Heart and Soul
Same
Trust
Peace
Enjoyed
Father Figure
Unified

Throughout the interviews, alumni and teachers used positive descriptors that reflected this culture of care and affiliation.

She recalled that he came home one day and “started throwing up,” saying, “I’m not going back to that school no more.”¹⁴⁴ A psychiatrist wrote a letter to the school and said it was not healthy for him to stay there.¹⁴⁵ The student withdrew.

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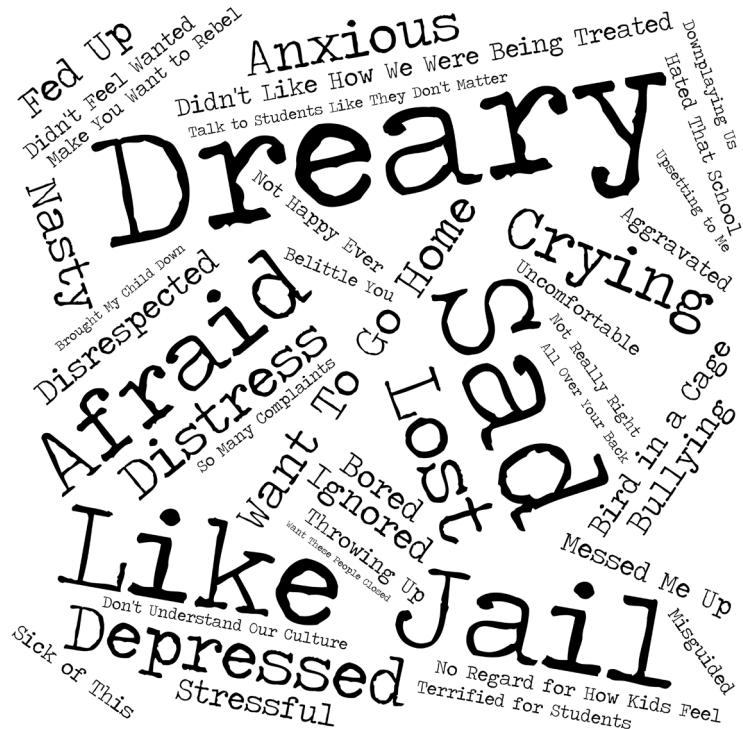
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I just kept failing, and I just felt like giving up because it made me feel dumb and stupid. They kept suspending me... I think they don't really wanna deal with the students. I think it's about money, to me. I know I'm young and I don't know anything about schools, but it's so obvious to see. Because if you really went to school to be a teacher, then that mean you really care about children... They [teachers] weren't from the community, and I didn't feel that teacherly love. I'm supposed to have a certain kind of bond with these teachers. They're supposed to be looking over and really caring for me...but instead it wasn't like that at all at that school.¹⁴⁶

Rather than creating social bonds that cemented students' commitment to school, students felt alienated. One student recalled: "I used to be really depressed coming from [the charter school]. When I used to first start out, I wanted to get up early...Then I started really getting down. I wasn't talking to [my mom]. I would just go in my room: no TV, just sit there, listen to music with my eyes closed, not doing anything."¹⁴⁷

Negative descriptors were recurrent throughout interviews with charter school students and parents, reflecting a culture of alienation, anxiety, and abuse.

Figure 6: Collegiate Academies Charter Schools (2012-2017) Sci Academy, Carver Collegiate, and Carver Prep Word Cloud from Student-Parent Interviews



CONCLUSION: STORIES BEHIND THE STATISTICS

THE ERA BRIEF ADMITS that test score gains have come at a cost: “On one hand, these reforms have led to significant improvements in student outcomes...However...there are important trade-offs in terms of equity in the student experience.” Nevertheless, the ERA brief, and the mainstream media that covers the story, prioritize seeming test score gains while student concerns and experiences are given less weight.

The testimony of students reveals that measuring the “success” of a school is a complex matter not readily captured by test scores or numeric data points. Unlike those at traditional public schools, such as historic Carver, charter school students relate a host of serious problems when interviewed. These problems were more significant than revealed by ERA’s qualitative survey data and are difficult to conceive as an acceptable “tradeoff” for other kinds of “gains.” The troubling experiences reported by students are arguably more consequential to their well-being than test scores.

Student testimony reveals a larger, more comprehensive picture, one which underscores that the quality of black education cannot and should not be measured by test scores alone. Something fundamental has been missed by the statisticians.

The Education Research Alliance’s narrative of “large gains in achievement” rests on a narrow and fragile foundation—numbers produced in isolation from the lived realities of New Orleans’ black students. When data is detached from history, experience, and context, it obscures more than it reveals. Behind the graphs and “growth metrics” are schools marked by high teacher turnover, diminished instructional investment, and punitive cultures that too often harm the very students reformers claim to uplift.

“The troubling experiences reported by students are arguably more consequential to their well-being than test scores.”

This critique of *New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms: 20 Years of Lessons* has shown that the numbers presented as proof of success are, in fact, deeply compromised and misleading. School performance scores have been repeatedly recalibrated to generate the appearance of improvement. Evidence of academic and financial misconduct — including test manipulation, grade fixing, and misreporting — casts serious doubt on the validity of the data itself. Meanwhile, ERA’s own findings on administrative spending, limited teacher experience, and students’ negative perceptions of fairness and teacher care contradict the glowing portrait painted in its summary conclusions. Ultimately, the evidence presented by ERA reveals that New Orleans’ charter school system remains one of the lowest-performing districts in the nation.

CONCLUSION: STORIES BEHIND THE STATISTICS

But perhaps the most damning evidence comes not from statistics but from stories. The testimonies of black students and parents expose a culture of alienation and control that contrasts sharply with the supportive, intergenerational, community-centered ethos of New Orleans' historic public schools. In these students' stories, we see the limits of a system driven by metrics rather than meaning and compliance rather than care.

Two decades after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans stands as a warning—not a model. The “achievement gains” so loudly proclaimed have not delivered dignity, equity, or justice for black students. A system that prizes statistical measures over the flourishing of our youth is not promising; it is destructive.

The future of education in New Orleans — and in the nation — depends on whether we are willing to listen to those whose lives ERA's data pretends to describe. Their stories, not the statistics, tell us what has truly been gained and, more importantly, what has been lost.



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¹³¹Carver Collegiate Student (E) interviewed by Kristen Buras, February 6, 2017, New Orleans.

¹³²Theron Lewis interviewed by Kristen Buras, April 10, 2017, New Orleans.

¹³³Ernest Charles interviewed by Kristen Buras, April 11, 2017, New Orleans.

¹³⁴Dwan Julien interviewed by Kristen Buras, June 4, 2018, by phone.

¹³⁵Sci Academy Student (B) interviewed by Kristen Buras, March 16, 2018, by phone.

¹³⁶Sci Academy Student (B) interviewed by Kristen Buras, March 16, 2018, by phone.

¹³⁷Mosley interviewed by Buras.

¹³⁸Carver Collegiate Student and Elder Sister (H) interviewed by Kristen Buras, June 7, 2017, New Orleans.

¹³⁹Carver Collegiate Student and Mother (I) interviewed by Buras.

¹⁴⁰Sci Academy Student (C) interviewed by Kristen Buras, February 5, 2018, New Orleans.

¹⁴¹Carver Prep Student (L) interviewed by Kristen Buras, June 8, 2017, New Orleans.

¹⁴²Kelly O'Guinn interviewed by Kristen Buras, April 3, 2018, by phone.

¹⁴³Sci Academy Student, Mother, and Father (A) interviewed by Kristen Buras, February 8, 2017, New Orleans.

¹⁴⁴Carver Collegiate Student and Grandmother (D) interviewed by Kristen Buras, February 6, 2017, New Orleans.

¹⁴⁵The author has a copy of the letter.

¹⁴⁶Carver Prep Student and Mother (M) interviewed by Kristen Buras, June 6, 2017, New Orleans.

¹⁴⁷Carver Collegiate Student and Mother (G) interviewed by Buras.

¹⁴⁸Harris and Carroll, "New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms," 31.

APPENDIX A

Appendix A Historic Carver Senior High School Student Interviews (1958-2005)

Decade	Students	Years to Graduation	Race/Gender	Interview Per Decade
1958-59	Merricks, Althea	1958-1959	BF	
	Lewis, Theron	1959-1962	BM	(2)
1960s	Joseph, Rhea	1960-1963	BF	
	Charles, Ernest	1962-1965	BM	
	Blackburn, Irvin	1965-1968	BM	
	Polk, Mary	1965-1968	BF	
	Calhoun, Willie	1965-1968	BM	(5)
1970s	Smith, Leonard	1969-1973	BM	
	Shaw, Ella	1971-1974	BF	
	Riley, Herlin	1971-1974	BM	(3)
1980s	Royal, Kenneth	1976-1980	BM	
	Mosley, Trenesse	1977-1981	BF	
	O'Guinn, Kelly	1982-1986	BF	(3)
1990s	O'Guinn, Denise	1986-1990	BF	
	Julien, Dwan	1987-1991	BF	
	Sparks, Hasan	1989-1993	BM	(3)
2000s	Gladney, Adrienne	2002-2004	BF	
	White, Catherine	2001-2005	BF	
	Lynch, Martaz	2003-2006	BM	(3)
			10 BF, 9 BM	T=19

APPENDIX B

Appendix B
Historic Carver Senior High School
Teacher Interviews
(1958-2005)

Teachers	Subject Taught	Years at Carver	Degree	Race/Gender
Enos Hicks	Physical Education	1958-1976	MA	BM
Charles Hatfield	Language	1958-1979	PhD	BM
Yvonne Busch	Music	1958-1983	MA	BF
Lamar Smith	Science	1958-1986	MA	BM
Lenora Condoll Gray	Social Studies	1958-1996	BA	BF
Vernon James	Math	1961-1988	MA	BM
Marilyn Pierre Degrasse	Business Education	1962-1970	BS	BF
Danielle Foley	Health	1971-2005	MA	BF
Clarence Righteous	Horticulture	1972-2005	MA + 45	BM
Avis James	Accounting/Counseling	1973-2005	MA	WF
Carol Righteous	English	1974-2000	MA	BF
Lindsey Moore	Principal (1965 Grad)	1985-1997	PhD	BM
Total				12

APPENDIX C

Appendix C
Collegiate Academies Charter Schools
Student-Parent-Teacher Interviews
(2012-2017)

Charter School	Students-Parents-Teachers	Affiliation	Race/Gender	Pseudonym
Sci Academy	Student, Mother, Father	Leaver	BM	A
	Student	Graduate	BM	B
	Student	Graduate	BM	C
	Teacher	Leaver	WF	1
Carver Collegiate	Student, Grandmother	Leaver	BM	D
	Student	Leaver	BM	E
	Student, Grandmother	Graduate	BM	F
	Student, Mother	Leaver	BM	G
	Student, Elder Sister	Leaver	BM	H
	Student, Mother	Graduate	BF	I
	Student, Father	Graduate	BF	J
	Teacher	Leaver	WF	2
Carver Prep	Student*	Graduate	BF	K
	Student	Leaver	BF	L
	Student, Mother	Leaver	BF	M
	Student, Mother	Leaver	BM	N
	Student	Graduate	BF	O
	Teacher	Leaver	WF	3
	Total = 18 Interviews** 28 Interviewees			

*Prep and Carver Collegiate

**Interviews were with a single student *or* a student and parent/guardian