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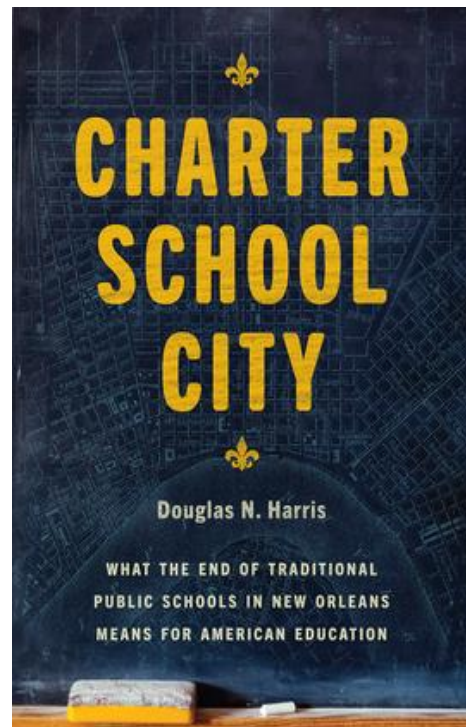
Harris, D. N. (2020). *Charter school city: What the end of traditional public schools in New Orleans means for American education.* University of Chicago Press.

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My family is from New Orleans. My father and his siblings grew up in a white neighborhood, intentionally zoned, and attended all-white schools in the 1920s and 30s, also intentionally zoned. In the 1950s, my family relocated to neighboring St. Bernard Parish, as did many former white residents of New Orleans. My mother also grew up in New Orleans and relocated to St. Bernard, where she attended an all-white high school in the early to mid-1960s. In 1960, around the time my mother was a freshman in high school, Ruby Bridges became the first black child to attend New Orleans's all-white William Franz Elementary school. St. Bernard opened a school on the St. Bernard-Orleans Parish line expressly to allow white residents of New Orleans to use school vouchers to escape federally-mandated integration of New Orleans public schools. Though the voucher school was forced to close a year later, the virulent anti-Black sentiment in the white communities of New Orleans and St. Bernard lived on.



Schneider, M. K. (2021, March 17). Review of *Charter school city: What the end of traditional public schools in New Orleans means for American education* by D. N. Harris. *Education Review*, 28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v28.3241> [A substantially abbreviated version of this review appeared in *Commonweal* magazine in November 2020].

In the 1966-67 school year, under pressure from the federal government, St. Bernard officially racially integrated its public schools, but not before the school board separated its middle and high schools by gender to prevent adolescent Black boys and adolescent white girls from attending the same public schools. In 1985, I graduated from an all-girls public high school. That same year, the St. Bernard school system was sued for not fully and completely integrating its schools, thereby depriving girls of the same extracurricular opportunities as the boys. My sister graduated in 1988; hers was the last graduating class from our all-female public high school.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans, white flight continued. White families either moved outright to the suburbs or they enrolled their children in New Orleans's parochial schools. The governor, legislature, and Orleans Parish school board actively worked to suppress the economic advancement of New Orleans's Black citizens by limiting job advancement, education opportunities, and housing options. As whites fled New Orleans, the tax base for public services and public maintenance shrank. Thanks to the ugly, ingrained, suppressive methods of whites in power, New Orleans had no solid, Black middle class to serve as a sufficient tax base to support and maintain public services, including New Orleans's public schools. And so, as one might logically expect, generations later the public education situation in New Orleans had become dire.

I have yet to hear any authoritative, white voice from New Orleans publicly assume responsibility for the horrid, nasty oppression that generations of white citizen resistance wreaked upon Black citizens' advancement in New Orleans in, among other venues, its schools. As I began reading Douglas Harris's book, *Charter School City*, I wondered if its pages would include such an acknowledgement.

The answer is, No.

The central focus of Harris's work is to compare test score and graduation rate data for New Orleans public schools in years immediately preceding the 2005 devastation of Hurricane Katrina with test score and graduation data from post-Katrina (c. 2006) to 2015. Based on these results (Chapter 4), Harris considers New Orleans's post-Katrina education reform efforts to be a success. Much of the book is devoted to examining possible reasons for improvement in the metrics. In Chapter 9, Harris concludes that New Orleans test score and graduation rate improvements are a result of the state's school takeover process.

Even as I read Harris's account of New Orleans's improvement, I could not help but think of the audit being conducted of New Orleans high school transcripts. The audit was performed at the request of the New Orleans schools superintendent due to initial findings of missing test scores and class credits, a scandal that affected numerous would-be graduating seniors at one high school. I also thought of the numerous lawsuits for the release of New Orleans test data from the Louisiana Department of Education, which is run by a champion of New Orleans reform. Thus, I am not confident of the integrity of the data Harris analyzed. Even so, data integrity is not my principal concern.

In Chapter 3, Harris details the state takeover of New Orleans schools in the chaotic aftermath of Katrina. At the heart of it all is former state school board member and businesswoman, Leslie Jacobs. Harris credits Jacobs with drafting legislation to declare most of New Orleans schools as failing. She and a handful of other white affluent individuals form the core of what Harris refers to as the “reform community.” Harris notes the importance of this reform community coming together to effect its reforms, including being offered office space by Tulane University, a private, predominately white institution. Ironically, Harris promotes one community at the expense of another. The reform community intentionally shuts out the predominantly Black New Orleans community in its planning. Indeed, this white, affluent reform community notably damages New Orleans’s Black middle class by Orleans Parish School Board’s mass firing of its teachers in the weeks following Katrina. Harris views this mass firing as unfortunate but necessary for the success of the reform effort in New Orleans, the ultimate goal of which was to replace board-led, traditional public schools with a portfolio of independently-operated charter schools. One reason in particular that the New Orleans teachers had to be replaced was that they were unionized; their union contract included such stipulations as teachers being allowed to be tardy to school ten times prior to any corrective action and administrators being forbidden from observing teachers’ classes. It is a good thing that the reform community could rely on Teach for America for temporary, predominantly-white, inexperienced, out-of-state replacements, in Harris’s opinion.

When I read about the above conditions in the New Orleans teachers’ union contract, for a moment I was surprised. I am a member of my local teachers’ union, and I have never heard of such conditions. But here is where researcher Harris should have gone further with his query: Why would New Orleans teachers feel the need for such job protections? Could it be tied to the generations of white, racist hostility at all levels of government and experienced by Black New Orleans citizens who tried to establish a place for themselves and their families in the middle class? Harris asks no such questions, nor does he posit that including the true community in the reform community’s plans would have presented an opportunity to build a trust that might have resulted in some negotiation to modify that teaching contract, especially given that the contract was set to expire anyway in 2006, a fact that Harris acknowledges. On the contrary, Harris celebrates Jacobs as a maverick of needed reform, seizing the moment and coming together with other white, affluent New Orleanians to create this charter school city.

In examining the reasons for test score improvement, Harris discovers that New Orleans parents want to have neighborhood schools as a choice option. He seems to nod with furrowed brow as he acknowledges that no such choice exists. Still, test scores are up. Also, in discussing the chartering process, Harris interviews Black community members who sought approval for charter schools, only to learn that locals need not apply. Finally, Harris admits that residents seeking to operate charter schools cannot choose any charter authorizer but are instead restricted to those approved by the state.

In reading *Charter School Choice*, I often thought, “Let me see where this goes.” So, when I reached Chapter 11 and read, “... I am not even arguing that the New Orleans model is best for New Orleans,” Harris had my attention (p. 218). In this chapter, Harris notes a number of limitations, including the inequity of free markets, the loss of geographic community, and “Jacobs and other reform leaders ma[king] their decisions behind closed doors” (p. 228). Once I concluded Chapter 11, I was satisfied to see that Harris did express concerns, but withholding those concerns until the end of the book made the book read as though it were written by two Harris: the first being more clinically distant; the second, realizing that his summations have practical implications and therefore offering clear cautions.

In those summations, Harris acknowledges that in the area of community engagement, the New Orleans reforms were, in his words, “least successful.” However, he does not consider the intentional exclusion of the community in leading the post-Katrina reforms to be the chief issue that makes New Orleans reforms unsuccessful, period, despite the outcomes of any metrics.

Harris does not understand the impact of generational disenfranchisement on New Orleans’s Black community, a point which he brings home in Chapter 12 where he again refers to Jacobs and her 2018 “carefully crafted legislation” to “return” (now) charter schools to local board oversight while preventing the board from “imped[ing] the operational autonomy under its jurisdiction” in a number of areas (p. 249).

Harris just wrote about the need for community engagement, yet he quickly returns to the same white affluence that in 2005 intentionally muted the voices of the Black community setting the 2018 legislative parameters affecting the New Orleans predominantly Black community and its schools.

Despite his strongly-worded cautions in Chapter 11, Harris ends as he begins, with a celebration of Jacobs and the reform community: “In effect, what Jacobs and the reform family have now done is to create an entirely new type of school district, one intended to entrench school-level autonomy, parental choice and performance-based accountability” (p. 248). This disappointing end baffles me.

Harris’s book includes much informative detail on education reform in New Orleans, but on the critical importance of community involvement in all aspects of education decision making, *Charter School City* fails. I consider it the best off-base book that I have read to date.

About the Reviewer

Mercedes K. Schneider began blogging on educational reform issues in 2013 at *deutsch29.wordpress.com*. She quickly became a trusted source for data-based analysis of the most provocative issues in education and has gained a national readership, including educators and scholars in multiple fields. Schneider has authored four books, all concerning education reform:



- *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Public Education* (2014, Information Age Press)
- *Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns Our Schools?* (2015, TC Press)
- *School Choice: The End of Public Education?* (2016, TC Press)
- *A Practical Guide to Digital Research: Getting the Facts and Rejecting the Lies* (2020, Garn Press)

Schneider holds advanced degrees in secondary English and German (B.S., Louisiana State, 1991), guidance and counseling (M.Ed., West Georgia, 1998), and applied statistics and research methods (Ph.D., Northern Colorado, 2002). She is an unwavering advocate for public education and teaches high school in her native southern Louisiana. Her teaching career includes 21 full-time years teaching public school and 5 years post-secondary.



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